

OCCASIONAL PAPER SERIES 4

COVID 19 AND NORTH CYPRUS:
PANDEMIC, POLITICS, AND NON-RECOGNIZED
STRUGGLES

METE HATAY

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ABBREVIATIONS

CTP	Cumhuriyetçi Türk Partisi (Republican Turkish Party)
COVID 19	Corona Virus Disease 2019
EU	European Union
HP	Halkın Partisi (People's Party)
RoC	Republic of Cyprus
TRNC	Turkish Republic of North Cyprus
UBP	Ulusal Birlik Partisi (National Unity Party)
UN	United Nations
WHO	World Health Organization
YDP	Yeniden Doğuş Partisi (Rebirth Party)

INTRODUCTION

The date was 20 March 2020, roughly a week after Turkish Cypriots had begun self-isolation in the island's north. That evening, people were glued to social media, where they followed a Turkish Cypriot businessman as he flew his private plane from Turkey. Financially supported by other businesspeople in the north, banker Mete Özmerter was on his way back to Cyprus with antiviral medications and important medical equipment, such as the test kits necessary for the PCR units used to identify COVID-19. Prior to his flight, there were only 750 of these left in north Cyprus.



Caption 1: Banker/Pilot Mete Özmerter, posing in front of his private plane (photo: Özmerter collection)

By the time of Özmerter's flight, this small, unrecognized area of the world — an area about which the World Health Organization (WHO) and other monitoring agencies do not even keep health statistics — had, along with the Republic of Cyprus, begun step by step to close its borders. On the same day as the banker's flight, the checkpoints had closed, and not long after flights arriving from or via Turkey were restricted. All arriving passengers would need to enter a 14-day quarantine. On March 21, Turkey would place the "Turkish Republic of Cyprus" (TRNC)¹ on its list of prohibited countries, and all flights would be

¹ The "TRNC" was unilaterally proclaimed as an independent secular republic on 15 November 1983. However, the "TRNC" has failed to gain international recognition from any country other than Turkey, and the UN Security Council considered this proclamation invalid and called upon member-states 'not to recognize any Cypriot state other than the Republic of Cyprus' (Press and Information Office of the Republic of Cyprus, 1997). Since the "TRNC" has not achieved international recognition, neither the TRNC's government nor its parliament are seen as legal entities internationally and are instead regarded as subservient to the Turkish 'occupation' authorities. Consequently, Turkey, the only state to recognize the validity and legitimacy of the "TRNC" and its political institutions (along with elections to those bodies), is the one that the rest of the world views as an illegal occupying power. Meanwhile, the only internationally recognized political administration on the island is that of the Republic of Cyprus (RoC), which

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cancelled or postponed. As these various restrictions were coming into place, test kits had entered the black market around the world and had become very valuable objects. Many countries producing the kits had even forbidden their export, while in the island's north there was a great need for them. Thus, when Turkish Cypriots in self-isolation in their homes saw Özmerter disembarking from his plane carrying boxes of test kits, it was a reason for rejoicing. Social media filled with posts of Turkish Cypriots whose fear at that moment turned to a tentative self-confidence. Quite a lot of those posts compared the pandemic lockdown with the Turkish Cypriots' "struggle for survival" during the enclave and siege period of 1963-1968 and began to boast that "we can succeed again."² In sum, the total of ten flights that Özmerter would make spurred a growing self-assurance in the community.



Caption 2: Özmerter's plane packed with medical aid (Photo: Özmerter collection)

was established as a bi-communal partnership state upon the island's independence from Britain in 1960. Hence, although the government of the RoC does not exercise *de facto* control over the northern part of the island, its *de jure* jurisdiction encompasses the island as a whole. The Greek Cypriot government of the RoC also enjoys international recognition as the representative of the Turkish Cypriot community as well, despite the absence (since December 1963) of the constitutionally mandated Turkish Cypriot representation in its executive and legislative bodies, along with the non-participation of the Turkish Cypriot community in elections to those institutions.

² During the intercommunal conflict of 1963-64, although approximately 25% of Turkish Cypriots were displaced, almost 90% of the population lived in 42 enclaves. In response to a Greek Cypriot National Guard attack on the Kokkina/Erenköy enclave, which had long served as a bridgehead for smuggling weapons into the island, Turkey intervened with its air-force, bombing and strafing Greek Cypriot military targets and villages which were populated mainly by civilians in the Tylliria region. Following this, a ceasefire was declared in August 1964, which continued until November 1967 with only minor incidents. During this period, the Turkish Cypriot enclaves were put under an economic and military siege, and most goods were not allowed into the enclaves. Among those goods not permitted were building materials, and therefore it was not possible to construct proper refugee housing until the easing of the siege in 1967 (Gürel, Hatay and Yakinthou 2012).

At the same time, many people began to quietly question why Turkey had not yet been visible in its aid, and why that aid seemed to be delayed. After Özmerter's first flight, the press disclosed that some medical supplies had arrived with another flight carrying students who had been stranded in Turkey, but the details of those supplies were not made available.³

This paper aims to shed light on this small de facto state's struggle against COVID-19 and the effects of the Cyprus Problem on that effort. It also will reflect on relations with the sponsor state, Turkey, in the context of this crisis. In addition, the report summarizes the stances of the European Union (EU), WHO, the United Nations (UN), and other international organizations towards the struggle of people in unrecognized entities in the context of a health crisis that, arguably, should prompt more, rather than less, international cooperation.

COVID 19 AND THE POLITICS OF THE NORTH

The first case of the COVID-19 virus appeared in the island's north on 10 March, one day after the first cases in the south. By that time, the Cypriot public was already aware of increasingly worrying situations in other European countries, as well as more stringent regulations intended to control disease transmission.⁴ As a result, new regulations in the north ran in parallel to growing public concern that bordered on panic. As in many countries, the north's prime minister (and UBP leader) Ersin Tatar, initially took the situation lightly, even remarking (on 2 March) that the problem should not be exaggerated.⁵ But this was also true for the opposition, which came out strongly against the 29 February announcement by the Republic of Cyprus President Nicos Anastasiadis that his government would be closing four checkpoints as a precaution against the transmission of COVID-19, even before any cases had been discovered. At the time, the decision appeared more political than cautious, particularly since the government closed the very busy Ledra Street/Lokmacı checkpoint in the center of Nicosia, a site of many bicomunal crossings, while keeping airports and seaports open. Initially, the closure was to be for one week, and it prompted peace activists on both sides of the divide to flood the streets and even to confront police in the buffer zone. In the north (and also, it seems, in the south), many of those protesting the closure were from opposition parties.

However, following the announcement of cases on both sides of the island, the public remained quiet, and politicians both in the south and north seemed in agreement, as further closures were effected. The first case in the north was a German tourist who was discovered to have a fever upon her arrival to the island. Not only this individual was quarantined but also all other tourists and personnel who had been in contact with her, or who had been in contact with other members of the tourist group. A total of 800 people would be quarantined for two weeks in three hotels that were rented for this purpose. The detection of the tourist's symptoms and immediate quarantining of everyone who had had contact with her was instrumental in the immediate control of the virus's spread. In the island's south, for instance, one of the first two early cases was a medical doctor in the Nicosia public hospital who returned to the

³ Certain members of the press close to the Turkish government revealed that, between 13 March and 24 April 2020, Turkey sent N95 masks, disinfectant and other medical equipment, including 126,000 surgical masks, 30,000 vinyl gloves, 18,000 protective masks, 11,000 protective suits, and 10,000 test kits. However, there was still no explanation why Turkey had sent only 72 of the 700 million Turkish liras promised in financial aid related to the crisis (Star Kıbrıs 25 April 2020).

⁴ <http://www.yeniduzen.com/mart-ayinda-covid-19-kibris-raporu-125114h.htm>

⁵ <https://gazeddakibris.com/tatar-sonunda-konustu-koronavirus-abartiliyor/>

island from the U.K. and treated cardiac patients while asymptomatic or displaying only mild symptoms that even he did not recognize as COVID-19.

Locking down

Despite this lucky early detection, the entry of the coronavirus into the island and the quarantine of such a large number of people put the public in Cyprus's north into panic mode. By nightfall of the same day, a large proportion of the public was using social media to call for everyone to stay home and self-isolate and even for the declaration of a state of emergency. Moreover, it was clear that the government was initially in a state of shock regarding the first case and the extent of potential contact. Through social media, citizens began to put considerable pressure on the authorities to enact more stringent measures. Indeed, when government spokesman (and HP leader) Kudret Özersay announced that instead the administration would be using a "proportionality"⁶ principle in deciding on new measures, he would encounter quite severe criticism and resistance. The people wanted a total lockdown.

The epidemic also hit the island's north right in the middle of a presidential election season. Therefore, the public interpreted many of their elected leaders' behaviors and decisions as oriented towards the election, and they criticized them on that basis. Even when politicians engaged in the same debates that are taking place at a global level regarding health practices and steps to be taken in relation to the epidemic, certain segments of the public perceived these discussions as reflecting one political side or party and opposing another. Because of this, when president Mustafa Akıncı requested on 13 March that the government declare a state of emergency, the automatic response of both the prime minister and deputy prime minister — both candidates for the presidency — was to reject the suggestion.⁷ Economic reasons may also have been behind this initial decision.⁸ Akıncı claimed that without the declaration of a state of emergency the situation would get out of control.

The government, in turn, despite accusations that it was moving slowly, closed schools and put in place certain social distancing measures. The same evening as its refusal to declare a state of emergency, the government put in place new restrictions, even while emphasizing that they had no intention of suspending democracy. They closed schools and public offices and announced that only necessary services, such as police, fire and medical personnel, would continue to work. It could be argued that, in this instance, a feature of life in north Cyprus that is ordinarily a disadvantage may actually have been a lifesaver. One would ordinarily consider the inflated civil service in the north to be a disadvantage, with its 17,000 employees, twice as many individuals receiving pension checks from the government, and an additional 30,000 social security beneficiaries. However, in this case, this inflation meant that, once schools were closed, it was relatively easy for everyone to do their shopping and begin to self-isolate. People also began to avoid crowded places of their own accord.

As Cypriots were quickly moving towards home isolation, movement into the island slowed to a trickle, while an exodus began. Students from Turkey began to fill the planes and ferries that would take them home.⁹ Although tourism did continue for a very short period of time, the growing cancellation of charter

⁶ <https://www.havadiskibris.com/adaya-kilit/>

⁷ <http://www.yeniduzen.com/mart-ayinda-covid-19-kibris-raporu-125114h.htm>

⁸ Due to mounting public pressure and because of the increasing blame game from the candidates, sides agreed to postpone the elections, originally scheduled for April 26, for six months amid the coronavirus outbreak. The 10th presidential election of the north is now expected to be held on October 11, and incumbent president Mustafa Akıncı will remain in office in a caretaker capacity until then.

⁹ <https://www.kibrispostasi.com/c86-GIRNE/n315076-ulkelerine-donmek-isteyenler-girne-limanina-akin-etti>

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flights would soon cause tourist services to be suspended. The personnel in such sectors is almost 90% from Turkey or other third countries, and as those sectors began to close, the exodus from the island sped up. As flights were increasingly cancelled, more and more of those seeking to leave the island took to ferries. Transport minister Tolga Atakan reported on 29 March that in the previous nineteen days approximately 54,495 people had left the island, while 15,534 people had entered it.¹⁰



Caption 3: Turkish workers and students rushing to get on the ferries at the port of Kyrenia (photo by Mete Hatay)

Many of those who entered the island were Turkish Cypriots who had been stranded abroad and who were returned to the island in an operation which many in the government viewed as risky but one that, despite certain small errors, was largely successful. In particular, news coming from the U.K. about the spread of the virus there brought panic to most Cypriots and especially the families of students in Britain. The British government's initial "herd immunity" plan and delayed response to the virus strongly affected minority communities, including Cypriots. Particularly in London, where around 50,000 members of the Cypriot diaspora live, deaths began mounting. At the time of writing,¹¹ the number of diaspora Turkish Cypriots who died from COVID-19 in the U.K. has reached 89.¹² Greek Cypriot U.K. diaspora deaths have passed 150. Largely due to such news, students' families put pressure on the government to have their children repatriated from the U.K.

Over the course of a month, using charter planes leased from private companies, the administration in the north gradually brought 2,500 citizens back to the island and put them in 14-day obligatory quarantine in hotels and dormitories rented for this purpose. Among those arriving, four tested positive for the virus. An additional issue that arose was the fact that some of the students were quarantined in hotels, while

¹⁰ Interview with the author.

¹¹ Late April 2020

¹²<http://www.detarykibris.com/ozersay-ingilterede-hayatini-kaybeden-kibrisli-turklerin-sayisi-89a-yU.K.seldi-216492h.htm>

others were sent to dormitories and that in at least one case the students were brought hurriedly to a dormitory that had not been sufficiently cleaned. This situation again created anxiety amongst the families; in one instance, at 6 a.m., three candidates for the presidency could be found in front of one of the dormitories trying to calm the angry families. The first to arrive was president Mustafa Akıncı, followed closely by opposition party CTP's leader and presidential candidate Tufan Erhürman, both of whom listened to the families' complaints. After the visit of these two candidates, the government spokesperson and presidential candidate Kudret Özersay arrived on the scene and promised to find a hotel for the students. The scene itself, with competing politicians wearing masks and trying to calm the families, might be viewed as a micro representation of the TRNC's nepotistic political system.¹³

Apart from those arriving during this period, there were also c. 60,000 non-citizens who were already in the island's north and chose to remain. These include expats with homes on the island and workers with their families who had settled there. Some, however, were effectively trapped because of lack of funds or lack of transportation to their home countries. Ziya Öztürkler from the ministry of education claimed, in an interview conducted with the author that the number of foreign students remaining in the north is 18,000-20,000. However, the president of the foreign students' association VOIS, Emmanuel Achiri, said that their estimates put the number closer to 38,000.¹⁴ Achiri's estimate likely includes 28,000 Turkish students who were stranded in the north and who on 26 April applied to the Turkish embassy to be repatriated to Turkey.¹⁵ Moreover, on top of this number are another estimated 5,000 persons who are no longer registered as students and are residing illegally in the north.

Based on these figures, we can estimate the number of persons currently in lockdown in the island's north. In addition to the minister of education's official number of remaining foreign students we may add registered workers and their families and an expat population of around 5000-7000, mostly U.K., Russian, and EU citizens. This brings the total to approximately 90,000 people who are not citizens but are either stranded in the north or chose to remain there. We base the number of registered workers and their families remaining in the island's north on previous censuses and reports from the ministry of labour, which indicate a figure of c. 35,000 persons. Turkish soldiers, officers, and their families represent another 40,000. With a citizen population of around 220,000, this indicates that there are currently 340-360,000 persons in lockdown in north Cyprus.

Economic measures

Along with health and isolation measures, the government also implemented measures regarding the economy. As soon as the hotels closed their doors and casinos' roulette wheels stopped spinning, tourism income dried up. Casinos announced that they would not pay their yearly permission fees to the government, and they furloughed most of their personnel. The construction sector also stopped working, turning north Cyprus into a graveyard of half-finished construction sites.

¹³ <https://www.havadiskibris.com/karantina-rezaleti/>

¹⁴ Personal communication with author.

¹⁵ <http://www.detaykibris.com/kibrista-mahsur-kalan-ogrenciler-yurda-donsun-imza-kampanyasi-duzenleniyor-216302h.htm>

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Caption 4: Unfinished building sites in Kyrenia (photo by Mete Hatay)

Starting in the first days of the lockdown, the construction sector alone would account for around 12,000 people being out of work. Because the majority of these were from Turkey, most tried to catch the first boat out of the island. Some succeeded, while others remained stranded in the north. By 23 April, almost six weeks after the lockdown began, prime minister Ersin Tatar claimed that the government had begun distributing aid packages to 10,000 persons, mostly presumed to be workers and their families. Most of these workers are also eligible for a subvention of 1,500 Turkish lira in April and May, based on a 25 March decision by the council of ministers to establish an employment support fund that will distribute subventions on the condition that the place of employment guarantees employment security for workers. Initially, only TRNC and Turkish citizens who had been making social security contributions would be able to benefit from this policy. The inclusion of Turkish citizens was the result of a bilateral labour force and social security agreement between the Turkish Government and the Turkish Cypriot government. However, the policy did not at first cover 17,000 workers from third countries and so became the subject of severe criticism. Several days later, the government bowed to these criticisms and included third-country workers in the policy.

In an interview conducted by the author with labour minister Faiz Sucuoğlu on 24 April, the minister stated that this 1,500 TL wage supplement will be given, and that as of the date of the interview, 43,000 applications had been received. Of these, he noted, 33% were from Turkish workers, 17% from third-country citizens, 35% from TRNC citizens, and 15% from small business owners who are employers (mainly TRNC citizens), such as barbers, butchers, etc. This figure indicates that around 22,000 workers from Turkey and third countries remain in the island. However, this is likely not the final total, as Sucuoğlu also noted that the application deadline is 10 May and thus they expect the number to rise to 60,000 (including Turkish Cypriot private sector workers). This is likely to increase the count of Turkish and third-country workers to 30,000.

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Apart from the anticipated 60,000 workers and small business people in the private sector, the government also had to give its own civil servants and pensioners a temporary pay reduction. The government calls these measures an economic precaution package. The measures are distributed by income category. While civil servants and pensioners who receive less than 5,000 TL per month net will not have any reduction, those who receive above 5,000 TL per month net will have a 25% deduction from their pay cheques. After the 25% deduction, no cheque that had previously been above 5,000 TL will fall below it. Moreover, the highest salary will be 8,500 TL per month, regardless of the amount of one's regular salary. For example, while a worker who makes less than 5,000 TL per month will have no reduction of pay, someone making 6,000 TL will have a 16% deduction, and a public servant making 10,000 TL will have a 25% deduction. The prime minister, ministers, members of parliament, and other political public servants with higher salaries will have 56% taken from their cheques. Excluded from these measures are those 1,500 persons employed by the government in essential services, such as health workers and police, who will have no pay cut. The total number of civil servants and those pensioned from the civil service is 35,000, while an additional 28,000 persons receive social security payments.

At the same time, the government would effect a 25% cut in its contributions to municipalities. TRNC embassies and representations abroad would also undergo a wage restructuring, in line with the local costs of the country in question.

Other measures include a suspension of the cost of living adjustment, which will not be implemented between March and June 2020. A decree that came into effect on 1 April also reorganized irregular payments, such as overtime wages and per diems. A fund of 750 million TL has been set aside to support the production sector. In accordance with a council of ministers decision, those businesses that have closed because of the epidemic and are unable to pay rent will, regardless of the sort of rental agreement they have, gain a reprieve on their rent payments until June, after which they will pay rent arrears in up to six monthly installments. Those who are able to pay their income tax, corporation tax, VAT, gambling tax, and rent on state properties on time between 31 March and 30 June will receive a 10% discount.

Using resources procured from local banks, the government set up a 100 million TL fund that will be used in the first instance to pay the interest that will accumulate because of the three-month extension of payment on loans to small- and medium-sized businesses that have been closed during the crisis. The government also made legal arrangements for credit card limits to be raised by 25%, regardless of income. The payment of credit card charges for petrol, food, and health expenses between 26 March and 26 April will be postponed without interest for one month. The minimum balance payment for credit cards will be reduced for a three-month period from 20% to 1%. In addition, the interest for non-payment of a credit card balance will be reduced for the same period from 2.35% to 1%, with no late payment fees.

Other measures intended to help individuals include suspending the implementation of financial judgments and evictions until 30 June, apart from alimony and subsistence payments. For all electricity bills paid on time in March, April, and May, there will be a 15% discount. The government has also made it easier for workers to take an advance from their provident fund contributions and has removed fees for delayed payment of social security and pension contributions.

In order to secure funds for some of these measures, extra taxes were put on cigarettes and alcohol, and there are plans to raise taxes on these items again. The government also has made moves to impose extra taxes on import items, such as milk products.

Although universities immediately moved to online education, both the university campuses and the other sectors that serve them are expected to lose most of their income for the period that they are closed. The large numbers of foreign students in the island's north not only support the universities but also have a multiplier effect throughout the economy, through money spent on rent, food, gas, and entertainment. The return of most of the student population to home countries not only affects the

universities directly, then, but also all these sectors, particularly in the cities where most universities are located.

Stranded in an unrecognized state

It was noted above that many labourers who are now out of work and foreign students who are stranded in the north are currently in need of aid. The problems that they face, however, are not only financial but are also related to an increasing xenophobia in this time of crisis. While many Turkish Cypriots have shown incredible generosity and solidarity with those in need, the crisis has also activated xenophobic reflexes amongst some persons in the political leadership and resulted in lack of sufficient attention to certain problems that may return later.

Ziya Öztürkler, from the ministry of education, informed the author that of the 20,000 foreign (third country citizens) students who remain in the north, 4,000 students are currently in need of routine aid to meet basic needs. Because of the effects of the epidemic in their own home countries, many of these young people have limited or no access to funds and have been left indigent. The municipalities and state universities have attempted to meet their basic needs by setting up kitchens and collecting donations. However, the foreign student's association representative Emmanuel Achiri informed us that the government has not given sufficient attention to the 5,000 former students who are no longer registered and have remained illegally in the island's north. For instance, the student association has had only limited success in its attempts to get the responsible government offices to deliver aid to 1,500 of these former students.

Author Chigozie Obioma, who completed his higher education in north Cyprus, described in an interview how youth from his home country, Nigeria, arrived in this unrecognized state like migrant birds with great hopes, thinking that they were coming to a European country. Most learned the truth only after their arrival but then found themselves trapped like birds in a net (Obioma 2019).¹⁶ This description seems to fit quite well the thousands of students from Africa and the Middle East who have found themselves stranded during an epidemic in this unrecognized part of the globe. They have no one to help them apart from a handful of volunteers and certain municipalities.

The condition is similar to that of labourers, though in many cases their living conditions are worse. Once self-quarantine began, business owners who routinely brought labourers to the island had no idea what to do with them. Some places of business reacted early and bought boat tickets for their Turkish workers to return home, thereby rescuing them from the responsibility to quarantine the labourers. On the other hand, certain businesspeople chose to retain part of their labour force and wait to see what would happen. Those labourers who remained, especially those in construction, agriculture, and factory work, are most often kept in crowded hostels with insufficient sanitation. Under such conditions, quarantine becomes difficult, if not impossible. Indeed, in other countries, such as Singapore, turning a blind eye to the conditions of foreign workers ultimately resulted in a second wave of the COVID-19 virus after the government announced that it had been minimized and began to ease restrictions. Because these sectors employ mostly foreign workers who are not unionized, there was no vocal reaction to the situation. In fact, while many public figures have noted the dangers of this remaining labour force and the indigent students, most have focused on their desperation, rather than the conditions of their quarantine. The

¹⁶ Chigozie Obioma, "The ghosts of my student years in northern Cyprus," Guardian Newspaper, 16 January 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/16/chigozie-obioma-booker-nominee-haunted-student-years-northern-cyprus>

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presumed desperation of these students also led to certain unfortunate, xenophobic remarks that have soured what has otherwise been an atmosphere of solidarity.

Actually, it is interesting that with the appearance of COVID-19 in north Cyprus, it was the political elites, more than the people, who began to display xenophobic attitudes towards the foreigners in their midst. For example, prime minister Ersin Tatar managed to draw the ire of several civil society organizations when he commented on a television program that the virus was an opportunity to “clean out” students and workers from third countries. Mr. Tatar told the TV presenter that “the responsibility to take care of the thousands of African students who live in the TRNC lies with whoever brought them here,” referring to universities and employers.¹⁷ He then added that “before this [COVID-19] crisis, this situation was a problem, now it has become an even bigger problem. This may be an opportunity to clear them out. This is not racism, but we have to protect our own citizens.”

Not surprisingly, students immediately responded to these remarks with a statement noting their dismay at the prime minister’s choice of language. Among the most prominent of these was the Voices of International Studies in Cyprus (VOIS Cyprus) office which, in the name of all African, Arab, Asian, Turkish and other foreign students, demanded an immediate retraction of the prime minister’s comments:

Mr. Prime Minister, simply saying that something is not racist does not make it so. At this moment in which the world is facing an unprecedented global crisis, what we need is a leader who unites us rather than divides us. Your remarks were racist, and we will explain why they were racist. Saying that something is not racist and then immediately making a racist statement does not erase the racism of that statement. Singling out a group within the community and othering them because of their appearance or place of origin is racism [it] is the definition of racism.¹⁸

Ersin Tatar did not apologize to the students but instead claimed that he had been misunderstood. But only a few days later, on 27 March, Tatar made some ugly statements that would draw responses from Turkish civil society organizations and the Rebirth Party (Yeniden Doğuş Partisi, YDP), composed primarily of persons from Turkey. In answer to program director Reşat Akar’s questions on Dyalog television regarding workers from Turkey, Tatar answered: “These people come here and work for a specific salary. It’s questionable if they even pay taxes. They have three children, and those kids are going to my schools. When they get sick, they’re using my hospital.” In response to the reactions he received, Tatar phoned YDP chair Erhan Arıklı to apologize, although he did not publicly do so. Tatar’s critics noted that instead of apologizing directly to the workers, Tatar put the leader of this ultra-right party in the position of representing all Turkish citizens in the island.

Tatar was not the only public figure to cause controversy with remarks about foreigners stranded in the island. Indeed, the Turkish Cypriot Chamber of Commerce president Turgay Deniz made shocking comments in an interview that many commented should become examples in the literature on racism. Deniz remarked: I’m not saying they should do this, but if those governing us are going to say, “I’m not giving a single penny to third country citizens, they can take care of themselves,” they’re opening the door for social upheaval in this country. We can’t leave these people hungry, thirsty, without work, this is inhuman

¹⁷ <http://www.yeniduzen.com/tatar-afrikali-ogrencilerden-ozur-dilemelidir-125462h.htm>

¹⁸ <https://gazeddakibris.com/yabanci-ogrencilerden-tatara-irkciligi-pekistirmekle-kalmiyor-baskalarini-da-irkci-olmaya-tesvik-ediyorsunuz/>

behavior. It doesn't become us. It doesn't become us at all. The state should at least come out and say, "I'm creating a military area, with barbed wire. I'm rounding up all the foreigners. I'm creating a tent city, and I'll put them in there. I'll give them three meals a day and keep them under my control." They're not taking precautions like that and instead are just letting these people roam around aimlessly.

Deniz, then recommended a concentration camp as a more "humane" solution to the problem.¹⁹ In addition to these students and labourers who had become the subject of xenophobic rants and have been aided mostly by municipalities and volunteers, early on in the crisis news arrived that a boat full of refugees had landed on the Karpassia shores. On 21 March at 3:30 a.m., the mayor of Yialousa municipality shared the following on social media:

This is a public announcement: last night 150 Syrian citizens entered our region illegally from our territorial waters! Among them are almost 30 children, and their clothes are wet. :(There is even a one-month-old baby... My request to you is for you to donate clothing for these children. Donations will be collected at 10:00 a.m. at the Yenierenköy (Yialousa) Municipality building.

The people of this area did not hesitate to help, and with the aid of the Red Crescent and certain other aid organizations, they settled the refugees in a gym facility in Trikomo/İskele. These organizations later moved the refugees to an apartment building belonging to someone who donated the space for their temporary residence without asking rent.

As with the foreign students and workers, Turkish Cypriots at the beginning of the epidemic opened their arms to the refugees and were particularly concerned by the fact that there were so many small children among them. Every sort of aid reached them, including food and clothing. Not long after, however, messages with racist and ethnocentric tones began to appear on social media: "This is just the beginning, more will come." "If you care for them too well, they'll invite their relatives, and we can't support them." "Turkey is sending them on purpose!" These and similar posts continue to appear on social media. On 25 April, *Detay* newspaper wrote that the refugees would be sent in groups to Turkey.²⁰ The first of these groups was scheduled to depart that same evening, the newspaper wrote. In a conversation that the author had the same day with Deniz Düzgün, a lawyer who had visited the refugees some time earlier on behalf of the Bar Association, Düzgün remarked that the refugees insisted that they wished to cross to the south and that they were unhappy in Trikomo/İskele, where they were not even allowed to step outside onto the balconies. At time of writing, all the refugees have indeed been returned to Turkey.

A tentative success?

Despite the seeming impossibility of the situation, a flummoxed coalition government, blunders regarding foreigners, and its insufficient health infrastructure, it seems that we should commend this unrecognized entity for its relative success so far in this global struggle. In part because of its populist reflexes, the

¹⁹ KTTO Başkanından Toplama Kampı Önerisi!: "Devlet Telli Alan Yapmalı" Ankara Değil Lefkoşa. Org <https://www.ankaradegillefkosa.org/ktto-baskanindan-toplama-kampi-onerisi-devlet-telli-alan-yapmali/>

²⁰<http://www.detaykibris.com/ozersay-ingilterede-hayatini-kaybeden-kibrisli-turklerin-sayisi-89a-yU.K.seldi-216492h.htm>

government yielded easily to public demands for a lockdown and took the decision early on. Although the government initially sought to ease into such isolation, in the end it made timely decisions. Among these were the increase of testing capacity and ICU units, the relative improvement of hospital infrastructure, and contact tracing and clustering most of the infected persons, all of which, under the circumstances, might count as effective steps. Granted, at the onset, because of an almost customary lack of discipline amongst personnel, there were cases of COVID-19 spread amongst persons working in quarantine facilities and their families. However, the problems were quickly identified, and measures were taken before the spread widened. In this regard, as in so many countries, local governments played a particularly important role, often acting earlier than the central government in contact tracing and isolating.

It is ironic that the north Cypriot patronage system and overstaffing of the civil service that are otherwise the source of much complaint in this case appear to have eased the process of keeping people at home. Every month, around 80,000 of this de facto statelet's citizens receive government checks of one sort or another; thus, even with the pay reductions, they were able to self-isolate in their homes relatively easily. Moreover, because many of the small- and medium-sized business owners are also retired from the civil service themselves and as such also receive checks, north Cyprus did not experience the reactions against a total lockdown seen in so many countries. Along with this, the departure of a large proportion of foreign workers significantly reduced the social and financial pressure on the government.

At the time of writing, 29 April 2020, there have been no confirmed cases of COVID-19 in north Cyprus for eleven days. To date, 30,496 tests were performed, and the total number of confirmed cases starting from the first case on 10 March has been 108. Four of these lost their lives; two of these were the initial German tourist and her husband. At the time of writing, there is no one continuing to receive hospital care. From 108 total cases, 104 persons have been released from hospital. The government is currently making plans to begin a step-by-step lockdown exit strategy, following WHO guidelines.

DEALING WITH THE GATE KEEPERS

As the island's north turned inward, its two doors to the world also closed. The first was the door to the Republic of Cyprus, which connects north Cyprus to the EU, and the second was the door to the world via north Cyprus's sea and airports that enable traffic through Turkey. These doors open onto what are known in the international relations literature as the unrecognized entity's "parent state" — the state from which it sought to break away — and "patron state." The latter is the only state that recognizes and sustains the de facto entity, providing the political, economic, and military support that unrecognized entities ordinarily need to survive. For instance, Abkhazia's patron state is Russia, while its parent state is Georgia. For parent states, any official international interaction with the breakaway entity tends to be perceived as "recognition by implication," and consequently such relations are minimized and tend not to take place at an official level.²¹

Parent state's role in the fight against COVID-19

As one of the oldest de facto states, the TRNC has a certain amount of interaction with the international community, where it is represented officially by its elected president, whose main responsibility is leading

²¹ <https://www.faiobserver.com/region/europe/rejeanne-lacroix-covid-19-post-soviet-de-facto-states-transnistria-south-ossetia-abkhazia-health-news-00665/>; <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/2020/04/taiwans-covid-19-success-highlights-global-risks-of-diplomatic-isolation/>; <https://www.voanews.com/science-health/coronavirus-outbreak/somaliland-reports-first-covid-19-cases>

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negotiations with Greek Cypriot leaders. Officially, this representation is not as president, but as leader of the Turkish Cypriot community. Negotiations, for instance, take place between the RoC president and the Turkish Cypriot president as leaders of their communities, rather than of their states. Any official interactions between the RoC and the TRNC take place as interactions between the two communities.

At the very outset of the epidemic, and more than a month before the first COVID-19 case was reported on the island, the Bicomunal Technical Committee on Health, operating under the auspices of the UN, held a meeting at the initiative of Mr. Akıncı to consider joint action against the potential risks and threats posed by the outbreak. In that meeting on 3 February, the two sides agreed to increase their cooperation through the bicomunal committee, in accordance with the guidelines of the World Health Organization, and they pledged to remain in close contact, exchanging information and providing assistance, as necessary. However, these amicable agreements began to break down when Mr. Anastasiadis unilaterally decided to close four internal checkpoints on 28 February, prompting Mr. Akıncı to remind his counterpart of the agreements reached three weeks earlier, which had included collaboration and information-sharing. As discussed above, though, the announcement of the first case about a week later would overshadow this controversial unilateral decision, as the Turkish Cypriot administration also began to close checkpoints, citing health measures.

Despite the unilateral checkpoint closures, however, there have been cases of concrete cooperation reported between the two sides in the context of the pandemic. These include the following:

- Two Turkish Cypriots who arrived in Larnaca Airport and were initially quarantined at a government quarantine facility in a hotel in the Troodos Mountains were transferred to the island's north and continued their quarantine there.
- Turkish Cypriots receiving medications from the RoC have continued to have those medicines supplied to them, despite the closed checkpoints.
- The crossings of Turkish Cypriots who receive medical treatment in the RoC were facilitated, after they underwent COVID-19 tests. They did not need to subsequently undergo quarantine in the north.
- Many Turkish Cypriots arrived from overseas through Larnaca Airport and were then transferred to the northern part of the island through the Ledra Palace and Kermia crossing points, allowing them to go under quarantine in the north.
- The Turkish Cypriot and Greek Cypriot leaders held a phone conversation on 11 April and agreed to have constant contact on the course of the epidemic and measures against it, and to strengthen the role of the Bicomunal Health Committee. As a goodwill gesture, President Anastasiades offered to provide chloroquine, which is produced in the RoC and has been experimentally used in treating COVID-19 cases. Additionally, the leaders agreed on the transfer of some medical and protective supplies to the Turkish Cypriot side.

Regarding the last of these measures, the tensions that had already begun to emerge in the north's unwieldy parliamentary system became even more concrete. For several decades, the political system in the island's north had maintained a balance between the president as head of state and the prime minister as head of government. However, in a period in which the president and governing coalition held different political views, this arrangement had begun to resemble a two-headed creature. As noted above, this was particularly the case at this juncture, because the arrival of the epidemic in the island coincided with a hotly contested presidential election.

As a result, while many in the north showed appreciation for the Greek Cypriot leader's gesture, prime minister Ersin Tatar slammed Akıncı in the media for accepting medical supplies from the Republic of

Cyprus and claimed that supplies were not needed. If they were needed, he continued, Turkey would be there to help. After the arrival of the medications and equipment, Tatar even accused Akıncı of illegally transferring the medicine and aid to the north. According to Tatar's statement, the drugs would be examined by the pharmaceutical services of the Ministry of Health and, if found suitable, they would be allowed to be placed in the warehouses and used. The supplies included approximately 2,000 chloroquine pills, believed to be effective against coronavirus, and personal protective equipment for medical staff. Tatar claimed that these medical supplies have been brought into north Cyprus illegally, adding that for the entry of any drug or medical equipment to the north, the importer must first gain permission and the item must be cleared through customs. "We learned from this announcement that we have committed a major smuggling crime," Akıncı joked, in response to the allegations.

Despite this incident, it is clear that in order to fight this pandemic and address its consequences, a joint, island-wide effort is needed. Since there is an established mechanism, namely the Bicomunal Committee on Health, it is important to increase cooperation by strengthening the role of the committee. For that, structured communication is important, such as, e.g., weekly videoconferencing to exchange information and take necessary precautions against this common threat.

Patron state's role in the fight against COVID 19

Since the 1950's, Turkey has been present in and has influenced Turkish Cypriots' lives on economic, political and social levels. For many years, the people in north Cyprus viewed Turkey as both a "savior" and an "influencer," and occasionally as like an overly meddling relative. Caught in this asymmetrical and paternalistic relationship, Turkish Cypriots have sometimes protested when these ties to Turkey have caused an economic slump, and they have at other times remained quiet and been "thankful" in order not to impede Turkey's economic aid.

It is no secret that the relationship between Turkish President Erdoğan and TRNC president Akıncı is quite strained. The new government, which took office six months ago, has worked to mend that relationship. Nevertheless, we see that the Turkish government has used the excuse of north Cyprus's failed economic reforms to significantly reduce its financial aid over the past three months.

Turkish governments have long desired to reform north Cyprus's economic system, which is unproductive and founded on patronage. The current Turkish government has been quite strict in this regard, announcing some years ago that it would behave like north Cyprus's IMF. This has meant tying aid to certain preconditions, such as privatization, which successive north Cyprus administrations have only partially fulfilled. The more recent refusal of Turkey to release its aid package appeared to be reflected even in the context of the COVID-19 crisis. Despite TRNC government statements that Turkey is always ready to help, a widespread public perception emerged between Turkish Cypriots that it had not sufficiently aided the island's north. While Turkey did transfer 73 million TL (approximately 1 million euros) to north Cyprus to be used in the coronavirus fight even before the first cases were discovered, this seemed a paltry amount in relation to the cost of equipment and materials to fight the epidemic. Moreover, after quickly entering lockdown in the beginning of March, the TRNC's revenue was cut in half, and for the month of April income dwindled by 67%. It is no secret that the north Cyprus government is experiencing a cash crisis. Within this context, there was considerable public surprise at Turkey's refusal to send further aid.

Moreover, despite Turkey's various promises, it has not been particularly generous when it comes to sending materials and equipment to fight the virus. After criticisms regarding this appeared in the media, the Turkish government leaked a one-paragraph note to the media saying that between 10 March and 25 April they had sent N95 masks, disinfectant and other medical equipment, including 126,000 surgical

masks, 30,000 vinyl gloves, 18,000 protective masks, 11,000 protective suits, and 10,000 rapid test kits (Star Kibris 25 April 2020).

THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY AND TURKISH CYPRIOTS' STRUGGLE AGAINST COVID-19

As soon as the epidemic began, Mustafa Akıncı wrote letters to the EU, UN Secretary General, the Islamic Conference, and other international organizations requesting assistance or aid and asking for both financial and technical support for Turkish Cypriots' fight against COVID-19. Unfortunately, we have been unable to locate any kind of equipment or aid provided to north Cyprus by any country or organization apart from the EU, which released 5 of the 30 million euros already set aside for the Turkish Cypriot community, to use in the fight against the pandemic. With the mediation of the UNDP and the Bicomunal Health Committee, the EU compiled a list of urgent medical supplies and equipment totaling 2.5 million euros and delivered these to the north. In addition, an EU announcement on the subject said that they had "mobilized" 25 medical specialists to help in the pandemic fight for three months. The European Commission has promised to "continue providing assistance [for the] further strengthening the COVID-19 response capacities, notably in setting-up an effective management, coordination and operational response structure and upgrading the Turkish Cypriot response plan."

At the time of finishing this report, the EU announced that they will initiate a series of new economic measures to help address the broader socio-economic impact of the Covid-19 pandemic in the Turkish Cypriot community. This package includes "support for structural business reforms, grants for micro businesses and industry, and direct investments for energy efficiency measures to stimulate green growth and jobs."²² The package of funding for small businesses, promotion of social and economic development, and encouragement of sustainable solutions such as energy efficient schools is expected to begin in July 2020. Actions within the package are intended to avert an economic crisis in the Turkish Cypriot community, with its expected consequences for society as a whole.

²² https://ec.europa.eu/cyprus/news/20200513_1_en

CONCLUSION



Caption 5: Head of the ministry of health Mr. Pilli is showing the newly arranged intensive care units (<https://saglik.gov.ct.tr/Haberler/>)

Despite all the problems and obstacles, it is possible to claim that this unrecognized entity, which does not even make its way into WHO statistics and which has been essentially abandoned by the world, has nevertheless so far been successful in its fight against the virus. Ironically, part of its success seems to be due to factors that are ordinarily handicaps. Like Taiwan, Abkhazia, Somaliland, and other de facto states, being already partially isolated because of non-recognition made international lockdown much easier. Given that its only access points to the world are via ports controlled by the RoC or through Turkey, it was relatively easy simply to close its airport and have its seaports open only for exit from the island. And by making it possible to cross from the south only under condition of 14-day government quarantine, it succeeded in quickly isolating itself from the rest of the world.

Moreover, by closing state offices and schools, shutting all but essential businesses, and demanding that citizens self-isolate, the TRNC quickly became one of the most fanatical countries regarding social distancing. As noted earlier, the structure of the economy strongly contributed to this endeavour. After enabling the exit from the island of most foreign workers in the private sector, as well as tourists and students, it was possible for citizens to successfully stay at home, relying on their salaries, even without social or political pressure on them. On the other hand, the government, which has now exhausted its funds, is looking to open the economy soon, in order to ensure revenue. The government has announced that, starting 4 May, it will follow WHO guidelines to begin a step-by-step re-opening.

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Although the TRNC has slightly improved its infrastructural capacity in relation to COVID-19, it still lacks important medical equipment and medicines, including an adequate number of ventilators. Despite an announcement by the minister of health that within two weeks 170 ICU beds and ventilators would be ready, the impression that actions do not always match words in the TRNC has created doubt amongst the public regarding this promise.

It would also seem that PCR test capacity is not at optimal level. On a recent television program, the minister of health claimed that the TRNC is in possession of 3000 PCR and 2000 rapid test kits. Half of the EU's promised 5 million Euros of health equipment has already arrived. The remainder is expected to arrive in the island within two weeks. In the meantime, the UN has provided much logistical support by way of the Bicomunal Health Committee. For instance, the UN has facilitated response to the urgent needs of citizens stuck on the other side of the divide, particularly by providing food aid.

While the EU did well in moving part of its budget for Turkish Cypriots to another budget line in order to provide them with assistance in this difficult time, now Turkish Cypriots will be in need of economic aid in order to return to some semblance of normality. The EU aid that will go to all its citizens, will be apportioned in Cyprus on the basis of the 150,000 Turkish Cypriots who are EU citizens. However, more attention needs to be paid by international organizations to the citizens of African and Middle Eastern countries who study in the north and have been stranded there. In many cases, their home countries are now being affected by the coronavirus, and they all carry the potential to become refugees, if they are unable to return to their countries. Any aid given to them would enable their prompt return to a normal life; it will also help the Turkish Cypriot administration, which is now broke. For instance, every year, international organizations, such as the Fulbright Program and the British Council, provide fellowships to Turkish Cypriot students. Since most of these students will be unable to make use of those fellowships in this academic year, a suggestion might be for these funds to be re-directed through organizations such as UNHCR, to aid these stranded students from third countries.

Finally, if the two sides of the island are not going to cooperate at a time like this, then when would they be expected to do so? It is suggested that the RoC and Turkish Cypriots should have been in more intense contact and cooperation from the moment the epidemic manifest itself on the island. For instance, it could have been possible to introduce a common pandemic hospital in the buffer zone. Besides, the epidemic is far from over, and there is always the chance that a second wave could hit the entire island even harder. With this in mind, in opening up, each side should take every step in cognizance of what is happening on the other side. In regards specifically to the RoC, it is proposed that it should try to encourage international organizations to help the north, rather than trying to impede such aid with "recognition by implication"-type arguments. Such collaboration would only bring the two sides and their publics closer. As soon as the epidemic passes, peace talks will likely resume, and this way the process could be greatly facilitated. Let it not be forgotten that, at the end of the day, viruses and their effects do not differentiate between a recognized entity and an unrecognized one.

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Appendix I

**EU aid PROGRAMME FOR the Turkish Cypriot community
 EU Support against the spread of COVID-19 Continues with
 Purchase of Urgent Equipment, Mobilization of Medical Specialists and Technical Assistance for Crisis Response
 3 April 2020**

Emergency Supplies List

PRODUCT	Quantity
Non-Rebreathing Oxygen mask (Adult and Paediatric)	4,000
High Flow Adult Mask	500
Closed tracheal aspiration system 10/12/14/16 fr	6,500
HME Filter	5,000
VTM (Viral Transport Medium)	200
PCR kits	4,800
DNA Purification Kit	1,680
Aerosol Barrier Sterile Pipette Tips	6,048
Ventilator, multipurpose H/T	40
ECG/NIBP/SPO2/TEMP/RESP/2IBP/CO2/CO Monitor	20
Pump Vol Infusion IV/TPN/Blood/Drugs	60
Suction Unit 1 X 2L Jar Mobile	20
X-ray, unit mobile, digital	1
Video laryngoscope	6
Video bronchoscope	1
Flowmeter O2	40
Cabinet Bio Safety Class II A2	2
Gowns (various sizes)	30,000
Goggles (various sizes)	15,000
Full face shields	15,000
Disposable overshoes (various sizes)	30,000
Overalls (various sizes)	30,000
Gloves (various sizes)	40,000
Mask Respirator ^{FFP2} Particulate Respirator ^{FFP2} / N95 ^{N95} (various sizes)	30,000
Medicines (antibiotics, antivirals, sedatives and paralytics)	150,000

Appendix II



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