

Turkey is cautious about how things go on the Eastern Mediterranean ARVAK Center comment, 02.08.2024¹

On 20.07.2024 two events of different content took place in Cyprus on the 50th anniversary of the same event. In the north of the island, the Turkish administration held lavish celebrations to mark the anniversary of Turkish troops' landing in Cyprus as part of a "peacekeeping operation". In the south, the Greek side commemorated the tragic anniversary of the Turkish occupation of the northern part of the Republic of Cyprus, during which thousands of citizens died and went missing, while tens of thousands were expelled from their homes and dispossessed of their property.

R. Erdogan of Turkey personally attended the celebrations in North Nicosia, the capital of the so-called "Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus" (TRNC). He also hosted a naval parade with the participation of 50 Turkish Navy ships and air force groups. In a clear demonstration of force, he peppered the show with harsh rhetoric directed at the Greek Cypriots, Athens and the international community. *"Those who think they can achieve their goals by putting pressure on the Turkish Cypriots are mistaken. Neither we nor they will give in to threats"*, the Turkish president said, alluding to a West-initiated new negotiating agenda that envisages the reunification of the Republic of Cyprus on the basis of a federal state model. At present, Nicosia and Athens are trying to persuade Ankara to agree to such a solution to the half-century-old conflict, but Erdogan categorically rejects it. *"We do not believe in solving the Cyprus problem on a federal basis. We are ready to negotiate and seek a lasting peace. A stable solution of the problem is possible only on the basis of the recognition of two states, this is inevitable, and we will make determined efforts in this direction"*.

To justify its position, Ankara refers, among other things, to the events of 20 years ago, which allegedly already eliminated the option of a federal organization of a "united" Cyprus from the agenda. In 2004, on the initiative of UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, a referendum was held in both parts of the island on the unification of Cyprus under the condition of federalization. At that time, 65% of the Turkish Cypriots who participated said "Yes" to Annan's initiative, while 75% of the Greek Cypriots rejected the proposed model. Now Turkey, referring to the results of the 2004 referendum, insists that this is a past stage, although from the legal point of view there is nothing that can prevent the sides from revisiting this issue and organizing a second referendum.

The fact is that Ankara is almost certain that this time the Greek Cypriots will approve the model of the federalization of the country, while the Turks of Northern Cyprus, as in 2004, will reaffirm their desire to live in a single state with the Greeks. Of course, the Turkish authorities were aware of the opinions of their Cypriot compatriots in 2004, but Ankara agreed to the referendum only because the issue of Turkey's accession to the European Union was still on the agenda. Now such a prospect is out of the question, and therefore Ankara is extremely uninterested in such negotiations. They could be the beginning

¹ The original (in Rus.) was posted on our website on 30.07.2024.

of Ankara's loss of control over the situation in Northern Cyprus and serve as an impetus for mass protests by Turkish Cypriots against the puppet government in the northern Nicosia, which is entirely controlled by Ankara. According to the Israeli resource *AURORA-Israel*, Ankara has absolutely no interest in the future of the Turkish Cypriots. It only needs to annex Northern Cyprus to its territory. For this purpose, Turkey is pursuing the goals of implementing the “two-state” model in Cyprus to legitimize the direct accession of the TRNC to its territory. *AURORA-Israel* argues that in this regard, the Turkish Cypriots have become hostages to Ankara's expansionist policies, which have left Northern Cyprus in a deplorable economic situation for half a century.

According to international sources, the percentage of poor people in Northern Cyprus is extremely high. The standard of living of Turkish Cypriots is more than three times lower than in the Greek part of the island, which has a wealth comparable to that of a European country such as Spain. Many towns and villages in Northern Cyprus that used to be inhabited by Greeks are empty and crumbling, even though Ankara once resettled about 100,000 residents from the most backward and poorest areas of Turkey to Cyprus. The main source of income of "Greek Cyprus" is tourism, but in the Turkish part it is in a deplorable state because, on the one hand, this economic sector also fell under the articles of the international embargo imposed on the TRNC and, on the other hand, the Turkish Cypriots have nothing to attract tourists except the sea beaches: no air connection with the outside world, no modern infrastructure, no historical and cultural attractions. In the occupied part of the island, about 500 temples have been destroyed and are in ruins. The number of destroyed cultural and historical sites has not even been counted. Instead, smuggling and corruption are flourishing in the Turkish-controlled area, and garrisons, checkpoints and barracks of the Turkish military contingent, which, according to different sources, numbers between 35 and 45 thousand troops, are scattered everywhere.

At the same time, according to Western sources, the level of hostility between ordinary Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots has decreased significantly compared to the past decades. The Greek Cypriots have finally come to understand that the solution of the Cyprus problem depends solely on the whims and geopolitical plans of Ankara. Meanwhile, the Turkish Cypriots themselves, against the backdrop of the prosperous life of their neighbors, are aware that the Ankara-inspired drive for independence has robbed them of their prospects for prosperity and integration with the developed world. Perhaps being aware of this growing sense of concern for Turkey, Erdogan continues to assure his compatriots in Cyprus that Ankara will do everything in its power to end the TRNC's economic decline. During his speech at the 20.07.2024 celebrations, he also touched on the issue in a few words: *“Our efforts to break the isolation and lift the embargo on Northern Cyprus will increase”*.

However, in R. Erdogan's rhetoric, as usual, threats prevail over persuasion. And there is a feeling that in this case one of the addressees of the harsh statements and the demonstration of force is also the population of Northern Cyprus, to whom Erdogan makes it clear that under no circumstances will he accept even the prospect of discussing a federal model for Cyprus.

The visit of R. Erdogan, his ministers, political party leaders and virtually the entire top command of the Turkish army to Northern Cyprus was hardly related only to the “anniversary” of the occupation. Ankara understands that the Eastern Mediterranean region is beginning to gain special importance in the context of the geopolitical changes in the world. Under these conditions, the extra-regional actors present in the Eastern Mediterranean may change their attitude towards the Greek-Turkish disputes over the Cyprus problem and openly support Athens on the status of the Aegean islands. Turkey cannot but be alarmed by the fact that the US and some of its European allies have established closer cooperation with Greece and Cyprus in connection with the well-known events of the recent years in Iraq, Syria, Libya and Israel, which are already affecting the balance of power in the region. On the stage is the expansion of the US military presence in Greece and the strengthening of the Greek Naval and Air bases by the US Air Force and Navy. In addition, in 2023, 4 new facilities will be added to the 4 existing US commodities in the country (Yiannouli Military Camp, Crete Naval Base, Lithochoro Proving Ground, Camp Georgoula). In return, the Greek side received from Washington admission to participate in the program for the development and acquisition of F-35 Multi-Role Fighters, substantial assistance in the modernization of the Navy, and Washington's lifting of the embargo on the import of American weapons to the Republic of Cyprus. All these processes give Ankara reason to believe that the US is turning Greece into its “*strategic foothold*” in the Mediterranean, which was predicted by international experts some 5 years ago, and that such close cooperation will change the balance of power in the region in favor of Athens and its ally – the Republic of Cyprus, which was born in the context of the Greek–Turkish confrontation.

Against the background of the 50th anniversary of the occupation of Cyprus, the international media actively discussed the news that Nicosia had agreed with the EU on the construction of a new naval base in the south of the island in the town of Mari, which will be able to receive civilian ships. The government of the Republic of Cyprus is reported to have stated that “*warships of friendly countries will also have the possibility [to use the Mari base]*”. The base will thus become the third largest military facility in “Greek” Cyprus with a foreign presence after the British bases of *Akrotiri* and *Dekelia* (established in 1959), giving Nicosia the opportunity to expand its defense capabilities and relevance in the eyes of its Western allies.

The news about a major new base in the south of the island was received with great jealousy in Turkey. Ankara is aware that the role of the Republic of Cyprus is increasing for the US and its European allies due to the situation in the Middle East and the need to provide Israel with reliable support from the sea. Ankara is also definitely irritated by the fact that the British Cypriot bases in *Akrotiri* and *Dekelia* are being relocated with US aircraft. In this context, “Hezbollah” has already declared that it will attack Cyprus in the event of a war in Lebanon to cut off Tel Aviv's support from its territory. In case of such a development, the position of the Turkish grouping in Northern Cyprus will become much more difficult. On 21.07.2024, Erdogan addressed these issues. During a press conference aboard the presidential liner returning from Northern Cyprus to Ankara, the Turkish leader

recommended that Greece and the Republic of Cyprus refrain from cooperating with Israel. Asked by reporters about the construction of a military base in the south of the island, he said that Ankara might resort to retaliatory measures: *“Turkey will not refrain from building naval bases and other sea-related structures and facilities in Northern Cyprus if necessary”*. Erdogan may have been more categorical in his promises to build a Turkish base at other times, but in the situation of the country's financial and economic crisis, he is clearly showing moderation.

A general review of Ankara's activities in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East (ARVAK Center has repeatedly [addressed](#) the issue of Turkish–Syrian and Turkish–Iraqi relations) shows that at this stage Turkey is beginning to “reap the benefits” of R. Erdogan's expansionist policy in these regions. Now, the country is looking for ways out of the *“Syrian game”* and is also trying to prevent the balance of power in the Mediterranean in the context of the Greek–Turkish confrontation. On the latter issue, however, Ankara's lack of substantive success can be seen, which it traditionally tries to compensate for with militaristic rhetoric and demonstrations of force. This, in turn, aggravates the deadlocked situation for Turkey in the Eastern Mediterranean, from which a way out is possible only after a change of power in Ankara. This was clearly stated by Greek Defense Minister Nikos Dendias in an interview on 21.04.2024 on the prospects of Greek–Turkish relations. *“We must not forget that Turkey is at a crucial stage of finding the direction it will choose when the country's president [Erdogan] retires from active political activity. Therefore, as long as argued claims remain on the table, such as casus belli, we must be prepared for any surprises”*.

Thus, we can talk about a change of trends in the region only after Erdogan's departure from big politics, which is what Turkey's opponents are waiting for and, as far as we can judge from various sources, Turkey is preparing for.