

Who Cares About the Cyprus Problem? A Socio-Demographic Analysis for Northern Cyprus

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Abstract

Using survey data of Northern Cyprus provided by two recent waves of Eurobarometer, we analyze whether a list of socio-demographic and economic characteristics and personal and political opinions make it more likely that a person considers the Cyprus problem as one of the most important issues at a personal or community level. While socio-demographic characteristics such as gender, age, or the education level are not determinant factors, people who are more involved in political discussions and who trust political parties are more likely to consider the Cyprus problem as an important issue. The region of residence matters as well. People residing in the Morphou region are significantly more likely to find the Cyprus problem as a key issue. Many of these residents had to migrate from the South of the island after the 1974 events or are descendants of migrants. Their concern about the Cyprus problem most likely stems from the uncertainty they face as a possible federal agreement could imply that they would have to relocate.

Keywords

Cyprus Problem; Northern Cyprus; Public Opinion; Migration

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Kıbrıs Sorunu Kimin Umurunda? Kuzey Kıbrıs İin Sosyodemografik Bir Analiz

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Özet

Bu alıřmada, Eurobarometer'in yakın zamanlı iki dalgası tarafından sunulan Kuzey Kıbrıs anket verisini kullanarak bir takım sosyo-demografik ve ekonomik özelliklerin yanı sıra kişisel ve siyasal kanaatlerin kişilerin Kıbrıs sorununu kişisel veya toplumsal seviyede önemli meselelerden biri olarak deęerlendirmesini daha olası kılan etkenlerden olup olmadığını analiz ediyoruz. Cinsiyet, yař veya eęitim seviyesi gibi sosyo-demografik özellikler önemli etkenler deęilken, siyasal tartıřmalara daha ok katılan ve siyasal partilere güvenen bireylerin Kıbrıs sorununu önemli bir mesele olarak deęerlendirme olasılıkları daha yüksektir. İkamet edilen ile de önemli bir faktördür. Güzelyurt bölgesinde ikamet edenlerin Kıbrıs sorununu önemli bir mesele olarak deęerlendirme olasılıkları anlamlı olarak daha yüksektir. Bu bölgede ikamet edenlerin biroęu 1974 olaylarından sonra gö eden kişiler veya ocuklarıdır. Bu kişilerin Kıbrıs sorunu hakkındaki endiřeleri, yüksek ihtimalle, olası federal bir özümün bu kişilerin yer deęiřtirmelerine yol aabilme olasılıęının yarattıęı belirsizlikten kaynaklanmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler

Kıbrıs Sorunu; Kuzey Kıbrıs; Kamuoyu; Gö

Introduction

The so-called “Cyprus problem” has been in the center of attention of the political actors of both sides of the island and, to some extent, also of international circles for more than 50 years. In the eyes of the public, however, as survey results show, the Cyprus problem is becoming less important.

Cyprus is an island in the eastern Mediterranean inhabited by mainly two communities: Greek and Turkish Cypriots. The initial bi-communal government formed after independence from the United Kingdom in 1960 lasted only for three years, after which bi-communal conflict broke out. This period lasted until Turkey's military intervention in 1974, after which the island was divided into two parts: the southern part mainly inhabited by Greek Cypriots and recognized internationally as the Republic of Cyprus and the northern part mostly inhabited by Turkish Cypriots. The Turkish Cypriots proclaimed the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus in 1983, which is recognized only by Turkey. Talks to solve the problems between the communities have been continuing since the late 1960s with several ups and downs along the road, most notably the referendum on the so-called “Annan Plan” in 2004. Most recently, the talks came to a halt in July 2017 after the abrupt end of the Conference on Cyprus held in Crans-Montana, Switzerland, with the participation of both communities, the three guarantor countries -Greece, Turkey and United Kingdom- and the intervention of the UN Secretary-General.

What is the Cyprus problem? The Cyprus problem, from an outsider's view, can be defined as “a dispute between two ethnic groups over power and geography” (Ker-Lindsay, 2001, p. xii) or as “a political problem dealing with the difficulty of getting the two major ethnicities on the island, Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot, to coexist peacefully.” (Webster, 2005, pp. 299-300). Although the talks have been going on for decades, the two communities differ in their opinions about the origin of the problem. While the Greek Cypriots see it as a problem created by foreign powers, for Turkish Cypriots, it is an internal problem caused by the existence of two communities and their nationalism (Flynn et al., 2012).

Why would political or economic issues be considered as important by the citizens? For an issue to be regarded as important, people should care about it, which would most likely be the case if they consider the issue as a problem (Jennings and Wlezien, 2011). For instance, people are more likely to find the economy as an important issue when the economy erodes, and there is more volatility (Singer, 2011; Wlezien, 2005) and when people feel personally more vulnerable (Singer, 2011).

Why should then the Cyprus problem matter to the Turkish Cypriots? First of all, living in an unrecognized state implies not forming part of the international community and not being integrated into international financial and capital markets. Moreover, it brings serious obstacles to trade and travel. Equally important, it also creates a continuous uncertainty about the future. However, people seem to give less and less importance to the Cyprus problem.

Even though we cannot say that caring about the Cyprus problem means necessarily that the respondent wants to find a solution to it, getting support for any solution requires that citizens/voters first think that this is an important

problem. In other words, although finding the problem important is not a sufficient condition for a citizen to desire to find a solution, it is a necessary condition. Support for a solution will not be found if most of the citizens think other issues are more important than the Cyprus problem. Moreover, if there is not enough public support for a solution, any proposal brought to a potential referendum is likely to be the result of pressure utilized by the international political actors as it was the case for the failed Annan Plan referendum in 2004 (Karabay, 2017).

What characterizes those people who continue to care about the Cyprus problem? To answer this question, we use individual-level survey data for Northern Cyprus provided by two recent waves of Eurobarometer and analyze whether certain socio-demographic and economic characteristics and personal and political opinion variables are determinants in considering the Cyprus problem as one of the most important issues in their community or at a personal level. To the best of our knowledge, ours is the first study to tackle this question except for a descriptive study by Flynn et al. (2012), which highlights the relationship between age and considering the Cyprus problem important. We find that people who are more involved in political discussions and who trust political parties are more likely to consider the Cyprus problem as an important issue. The district of residence matters as well. People residing in the Morphou (Güzelyurt) region, where many families that had to migrate after the 1974 events or their descendants live, are significantly more likely to consider the Cyprus problem as a key issue personally and/or for the community. The possibility of having to migrate again if the Cyprus problem is solved by the formation of a federal state is possibly another key factor why the region of residence matters.

The paper is organized as follows. The next section explains the variables, data, and the regression model we use. Then, we present our results, which are followed by our conclusions.

Data, Variables and Regression Model

The data source of our variables is the Eurobarometer Survey (November 2016 and May 2017 waves). The Eurobarometer is a public opinion survey conducted by the European Commission that covers a variety of topics and 35 countries, including the Turkish Cypriot Community (TCC). In Northern Cyprus, the survey was conducted by Lipa Consultancy, between May 11th and May 13th, 2016, and between May 20th and May 30th, 2017. A multi-stage, random sampling design was used. Firstly, from each administrative unit in each country, primary sampling units were selected with probabilities that were proportional to the population size. In the second stage, from each primary sampling unit, a cluster of starting addresses was randomly selected. Then, more addresses were selected following “standard random route procedures as every Nth address from the initial address.”¹ To choose the member of the household to be interviewed, the rule of the closest birthday was followed. For most countries, the sample size is 1000, except for the United Kingdom (Great Britain and Northern Ireland were sampled separately), Germany (separated in Eastern and Western parts), Luxemburg, Republic of Cyprus,

1) <https://zacat.gesis.org/webview/index.jsp?object=http://zacat.gesis.org/obj/fStudy/ZA6863>

Malta, Montenegro, and Northern Cyprus, with a sample size of 500 households. Since the available data is a representative sample of Northern Cyprus, the analysis we conduct with this database can be extrapolated to the whole population.

Our dependent variable, Cyprus problem is important, is based on the answer to the following two questions: "What do you think are the two most important issues facing our Community at the moment?" and "And personally, what are the two most important issues you are facing at the moment?". The respondents are given different possible alternatives: crime, the economic situation, terrorism, environmental problems, etc. In the case of the TCC, they are also given the option of answering the "Cyprus issue"². The dependent variable takes value 1 if the interviewee answered the "Cyprus issue" as part of her answer to either of the two questions.

Our independent variables can be classified into three categories: personal characteristics, opinion variables, and geographic location. The first group comprises of five variables: gender, age, and education level of the respondent, if there is a child under the age of 15 in the household, and a proxy for the income level of the household.

The variable Age was included because Flynn et al. (2012) found that the respondents of their survey who thought the Cyprus problem to be important were younger Turkish Cypriots and older Greek Cypriots, implying that age affects the importance they attach to the Cyprus problem. We expect to find a similar result, i.e., that younger Turkish Cypriots find the Cyprus problem more relevant than older respondents.

We created a dummy variable for the education level of the respondent. This variable (High education level) takes value 1 if the respondent was at least 20 years old when she stopped her full-time education or if she is still studying and is at least 20 years old. Otherwise, High education level takes value 0.

The variable Children under 15 in the household takes value 1 if there is at least one child younger than 15 years old living in the household and 0 otherwise. It could be argued that a respondent would care more about the future if she has a child in her household because the future of this child would be significantly affected if the Cyprus problem is resolved, making the Cyprus problem a more salient issue.

The last personal characteristic included is the household socio-economic status. It is captured by the variable Upper and upper middle class of society that takes value 1 if the respondent answered "The upper middle class of society" or "The higher class of society" when asked "Do you see yourself and your household belonging to...?". It takes value 0 if she answered "The working class of society", "The lower middle class of society", or "The middle class of society". We included this variable because focusing on Greek Cypriots, Webster (2005) argues that people with a higher socio-economic condition should prefer the status-quo or division of the island as they are the ones who benefit from the current situation. A similar argument could be applied to Northern Cyprus. So, we would expect respondents

2) Although the wording used by the survey to refer to this issue is "Cyprus issue", throughout the text we will use the term "Cyprus problem" as this is the most commonly used term by the literature as well as the press, politicians, diplomats etc.

of higher socio-economic status to give less importance to the Cyprus problem.

We also include dummy variables for the district of residence of the respondent. These are Famagusta, Kyrenia, Morphou, and Iskele. The omitted district is Nicosia. A bi-zonal, bi-communal solution (like the Annan Plan) will most likely lead to "voluntary or compulsory migration" (Serdaroğlu, 2012, p. 534) for people living in certain regions. This possibility creates uncertainty and concern, especially in the Morphou region. The town of Morphou was inhabited almost entirely by Greek Cypriots before the 1974 events (Psaltis et al., 2020) and is currently inhabited by Turkish Cypriots who had to migrate from the South of the island after 1974 and immigrants from mainland Turkey (Serdaroğlu, 2012). The Annan Plan, the only solution proposal put to a referendum on both sides of the island, intended to return properties in Morphou to its former Greek Cypriot owners (Deveci, 2017). Even after the latest (failed) round of talks regarding a possible territorial exchange, one of the remaining issues is the fate of Morphou, that is, whether it will be returned to Greek Cypriots or not (Sözen, 2017). While for Greek Cypriots, any deal should include the "return" of Morphou, at present Turkish Cypriots leave out this option (Paul, 2017). Such uncertainty about their future is likely to cause more interest in the Cyprus problem among residents of this region. Referring to the behavior of the residents of Morphou in the 2004 referendum, Karabay (2017) points out that "Although its residents would have to be relocated had the plan been implemented, percentage of "yes" votes in the Güzeyurt region was surprisingly 65 percent, which was perceived as a clear sign of the pessimism or limbo of its residents" (Karabay, 2017, p. 30). For this reason, dummies capturing the location of the respondents are included, and we expect residents of the Morphou region to be more likely to consider the Cyprus problem as an important issue. We also include a dummy variable to capture whether the respondent lives in a rural or urban area (variable "Rural").

Regarding opinion variables, we included five dummy variables. The first one, Trust political parties, takes value 1 if the respondent answered "Tend to trust" when asked "I would like to ask you a question about how much trust you have in certain institutions. For each of the following institutions, please tell me if you tend to trust it or tend not to trust it...Political parties". And the variable takes value 0 if she responded "Tend not to trust". The reason to include this variable is our belief that respondents who trust political parties may be more optimistic about a potential solution to the Cyprus problem since a solution, first of all, has to be accepted by political actors before it is brought to the approval of the society. This optimism, in turn, may lead to an inclination of those respondents to care more about the Cyprus problem.

Our second opinion variable is "Attached to town". It takes value 1 if the respondent answered "Very attached" or "Fairly attached" to the question "Please tell me how attached you feel to...Your city / town / village", and value 0 if she answered "Not very attached" or "Not at all attached". The rationale behind its inclusion is that Turkish Cypriots that are very much attached to their town might be more preoccupied with the Cyprus problem as a potential solution to the problem will most likely lead to the relocation of several households in the North. Moreover,

we would also expect people who are more engaged in political discussions to give more importance to the Cyprus problem as it is one of the key issues in the discussions of the political elite. Hence, we also include as an independent variable the dummy “Discuss community issues”, that takes value 1 if the respondent answered “Frequently” to the question “When you get together with friends or relatives, would you say you discuss frequently, occasionally or never about... Our Community’s political matters?”.

The fourth opinion variable included is “Eco situation of TCC is bad” that takes value 1 if the respondent answered “Rather bad” or “Very bad” to the question “How would you judge the current situation in each of the following?... The economic situation in the Turkish Cypriot Community”. Regarding this question, we could expect a negative effect on the dependent variable: Thinking that the economic situation of the TCC is bad will increase the probability that she cares more about economic problems (Singer, 2011; Wlezien, 2005) rather than the Cyprus problem. On the other hand, we could expect a positive effect if the respondent thinks that solving the Cyprus problem will improve the economic situation of the TCC. In other words, those Turkish Cypriots who judge the current economic situation negatively, may give more importance to the Cyprus problem as a solution to the problem is expected to bring economic benefits to the island (see for instance Flynn et al., 2012; Johnson et al., 2010; Mullen et al., 2008).

Our fifth opinion variable is the dummy “EU legislation good for TCC” that shows whether the respondent has answered “A good thing” when asked “Generally speaking, do you think that for the Turkish Cypriot Community the full application of EU legislation would be...?”. A solution to the Cyprus problem would imply for the TCC to become a member of the European Union (EU). As a consequence, it will carry the application of EU legislation in Northern Cyprus. Having a more positive view about the application of EU legislation might imply being keener on a solution to the Cyprus problem. Therefore, we expect to observe a positive effect of this variable on the probability of answering that the Cyprus problem is one of the two most important problems at the moment. Kyris (2012) observes that the percentage of Turkish Cypriots who consider EU membership a good thing has been decreasing in the first decade of the 21st century. So, if having a positive opinion about the EU makes it more likely to consider the Cyprus problem as an important issue, the decrease in support for the EU might be one explanation of the downwards trend in the importance of the Cyprus problem.

Since in the first half of 2017, the negotiations took a more optimistic turn, and the latest wave of the survey we use was conducted in May 2017, shortly before and in anticipation of the Conference on Cyprus which started in late June 2017, we include the dummy variable “Wave 2017” to control for the possible effect of this renewed optimism/increased expectations.

Given the nature of the dependent variable –it takes value 1 if the respondent finds the Cyprus problem important and 0 otherwise– we run a probit model. This regression model allows us to explain the effect of each one of our independent variables on the probability of finding the Cyprus problem important while controlling for the other covariates.

Results

When we look at the evolution of the percentage of people that mention the Cyprus problem as one of the two most important issues at the moment, either at the community or the personal level, we observe a decline over time. The percentage fell from 32.8% in 2008 to 24.4% in 2017. Figure 1 shows the values for the mentioned period.³

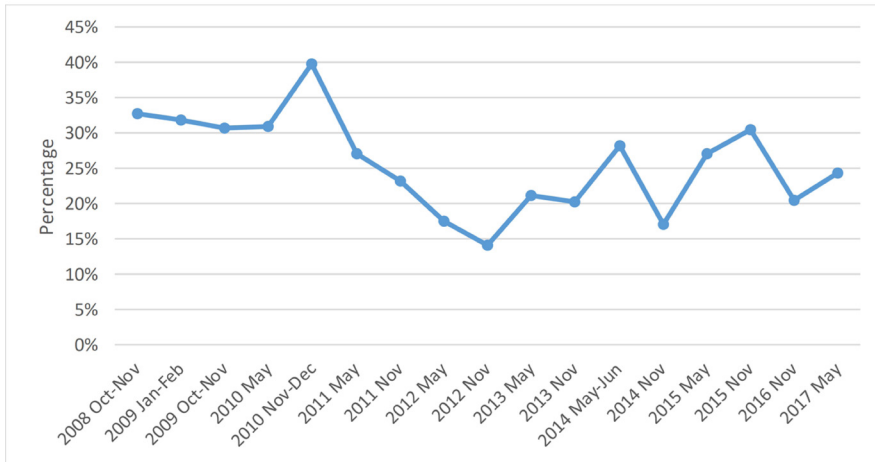


Figure 1: Percentage of people that think that the Cyprus problem is one of the two most important issues at the moment

Table 1 below shows some descriptive statistics for the dependent and independent variables combining data of the two waves we use in our study. 21% (24%) of the subjects thought that the Cyprus problem was important in the wave of November 2016 (May 2017). It is interesting to notice that only 29% of the respondents trust political parties, and only 32% discuss community issues with relatives or friends. Almost 62% of the respondents think that the economic situation of the TCC is bad, and 59% believe that the application of EU legislation would be a good thing for the TCC.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics

		Obs	Mean	Std.dev.	Min	Max
Independent variable	Cyprus problem is important	1,000	0.225	0.418	0	1
Personal characteristics	Woman	1,000	0.499	0.500	0	1
	Age	1,000	38.976	15.332	15	96
	High education level	969	0.390	0.488	0	1
	Children under 15 in the household	1,000	0.341	0.474	0	1
	Upper and upper middle class of society	980	0.171	0.377	0	1

3) Data from Eurobarometer survey, waves 2008-2017.

Opinion variables	Trust political parties	920	0.285	0.452	0	1
	Attached to town	993	0.887	0.316	0	1
	Discuss community issues	980	0.322	0.468	0	1
	Eco situation of TCC is bad	990	0.617	0.486	0	1
	EU legislation good for TCC	925	0.581	0.494	0	1
Geographical situation	Famagusta	1,000	0.262	0.440	0	1
	Kyrenia	1,000	0.188	0.391	0	1
	Morphou	1,000	0.129	0.335	0	1
	Iskele	1,000	0.107	0.309	0	1
	Rural	1,000	0.246	0.431	0	1
	Wave 2017	1,000	0.500	0.500	0	1

Table 2 presents the results of the econometric regression. We run a probit model with our three sets of independent variables: personal characteristics, opinion variables, and geographic location.

Table 2: Regression results

Probit model - Dependent variable: Cyprus problem is important		Marginal effect	Std. Err.	p-value
Personal characteristics	Woman	0.022	0.031	0.491
	Age	0.001	0.001	0.203
	High education level	0.010	0.033	0.769
	Children under 15 in the household	0.076	0.035	0.030
	Upper and upper middle class of society	0.037	0.044	0.401
Opinion variables	Trust political parties	0.082	0.040	0.038
	Attached to town	-0.026	0.055	0.640
	Discuss community issues	0.066	0.036	0.064
	Eco situation of TCC is bad	0.016	0.032	0.621
	EU legislation good for TCC	0.049	0.033	0.136
Geographical situation	Famagusta	0.033	0.045	0.468
	Kyrenia	0.026	0.048	0.597
	Morphou	0.129	0.065	0.047
	Iskele	-0.020	0.058	0.736
	Rural	-0.046	0.037	0.220
	Wave 2017	0.081	0.035	0.019
n	794			
Wald chi2 (16)	28.31			
Prob > chi2	0.029			
Pseudo R²	0.0394 ⁴			

4) The Pseudo R² reported by Stata corresponds to McFadden's p₂. We should be aware that "While the R² index is a more familiar concept to planners who are experienced in ordinary regression analysis, it is not as well behaved a statistic as the p₂ measure, for maximum likelihood estimation. Those unfamiliar with the p₂ index should be forewarned that its values tend to be considerably lower than those of the R² index and should not be judged by the standards for a "good fit" in ordinary regression analysis. For example, values of 0.2 to 0.4 for p₂ represent an excellent fit." (McFadden, 1977, pp. 34-35)

We find that only four variables (excluding the wave) have a significant effect on the probability of answering that the Cyprus problem is one of the two most important problems at the moment.

Firstly, as expected, the variable Children under 15 in the household has a positive and significant effect on the dependent variable. The probability of considering the Cyprus problem important is 7.6 percentage points (p.p.) higher for those respondents who have at least one child under 15 years old in the household compared to the respondents without young children in the house. It gives support to our conjecture that respondents with children under 15 years old at home would care more about the future and therefore would care more about the Cyprus problem.

Secondly, respondents who trust political parties are 8.2 p.p. more likely to find the Cyprus problem important than respondents who do not trust political parties. This result is in line with our expectation that a higher level of trust in political parties implies a more positive view about the possibility of finding a solution for the Cyprus problem, and therefore, it implies a higher probability of considering it an important issue.

The same happens with respondents who discuss community issues with friends and relatives. They are 6.6 p.p. more likely than those who do not discuss community issues to answer that the Cyprus problem is important.

However, the largest effect comes from the place of living. If the respondent lives in the Morphou district, her probability of considering the Cyprus problem as important is 12.9 p.p. higher than the probability of a respondent who lives in Nicosia. Many of the residents in Morphou migrated from the South when the island was divided in 1974, and at the same time, it is expected that some residents would have to relocate if a solution to the Cyprus problem is found. It is not surprising then that respondents living in the Morphou district are more concerned about the Cyprus problem than residents in other districts. Many of the respondents who found the Cyprus problem important might be worried about having to relocate, and some of them for the second time in their lives.

As expected, the wave plays a significant role: the probability of considering the Cyprus problem an important issue increases by 8.1 p.p. for the 2017 wave. Interestingly, the age and socio-economic status do not play a significant role; neither does the evaluation of the current economic situation in Northern Cyprus or having a more positive view about the application of EU legislation in the North.

Conclusions

Our objective in this paper was to investigate the socio-demographic and economic characteristics and personal and political opinions of the residents in Northern Cyprus who are more likely to consider the Cyprus problem as one of the most important issues at a personal or community level.

Our findings indicate that those who are more politically involved on one side (i.e., respondents who discuss community issues with friends and relatives), and those who fear a potential relocation if the Cyprus problem is solved on the other (i.e., respondents living in the Morphou district), are more likely to consider the

Cyprus problem as one of their community's or their own most significant issues. This finding may be reflecting a concern of Morphou residents created by the uncertainty of the future of the region. Although the Annan plan was approved by a majority in the district, the passage of more than 15 years since then, suggests that for a new solution plan to be approved by the residents of the region, their concerns should be addressed by the actors of the solution process.

We also observe that citizens that trust political parties are more likely to consider the Cyprus problem important. Iyengar (1989) found that the opinion and attitudes of the public regarding national issues are linked to how they attribute issue responsibility: who originated the problem and who can solve it. Thus, our finding might indicate that people trusting political parties assign "treatment responsibility" to the political parties, i.e., they believe that the political parties can be part of the solution to the problem. Nonetheless, as stated by Russell and Weldon (2005), there has been a decline in citizen's trust in political parties in recent years in Western democracies. Moreover, they observe that citizens who do not trust political parties are less likely to participate in elections and other forms of partisan politics. Our finding shows that trust in political parties also influences how important Northern Cyprus citizens think the Cyprus problem is. This means that measures have to be taken to increase the low level of trust in political parties (see Table 1).

Regarding other political and economic opinion variables, we were expecting that people who think that the application of EU legislation in Northern Cyprus would be good for the community would be more likely to consider the Cyprus problem as an important issue as the solution of the problem would potentially lead to the application of EU legislation in Northern Cyprus. Similarly, we conjectured that people who evaluate the economic situation of Northern Cyprus more negatively may be more likely to consider the Cyprus problem as an important issue if they believe that the solution to the problem would improve the economic situation. In the case of both variables, in line with the previous arguments, the coefficients have a positive sign, but the relationships fail to be statistically significant. Similarly, the age and socio-economic status of the respondents do not play a significant role.

Although we find a significant and positive effect of the latest wave, it is most likely the result of the increasing expectations in advance of the Conference on Cyprus. As the overall trend shows, time seems to work against a potential solution to the problem.

The Cyprus problem involves both communities of the island, and a potential solution requires a total agreement on both sides. However, our study focused only on Northern Cyprus, and thus it shows only part of the picture. Although the Eurobarometer survey asks Greek Cypriots the question used in this study, the Cyprus problem was not among the list of options as an answer to that particular question. Hence, we cannot make any cross-community comparisons. Conducting a survey on both sides of the island, which would allow us to make such comparisons, would be an interesting path to take.

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