Patron-Client Dynamics and Political Outcomes: The Case of Turkey and Northern Cyprus

Ioannis N. GRIGORIADIS
Associate Professor, Department of Political Science and Public Administration, Bilkent University, Ankara
E-Mail: ioannis@bilkent.edu.tr
Orcid: 0000-0003-0882-6125

Miyuki KONNAI
PhD, Department of Political Science and Public Administration, Bilkent University, Ankara
E-Mail: miyuki.konnai@bilkent.edu.tr
Orcid: 0009-0008-1033-8175

Abstract

This article challenges the conventional understanding of unrecognized states as mere puppets of their patron states by examining the complex relationship between Turkey and Northern Cyprus. While *de facto* states are often perceived as dependent entities controlled by their patrons, the case of Northern Cyprus presents an intriguing contradiction. Despite heavy reliance on Turkey for economic and security support, it maintains a distinct political culture characterized by greater civil liberties and political freedom than its patron. Turkish Cypriots have shown a strong capacity for resistance when perceiving threats to their autonomy, secular traditions, or identity. Their unique access to Republic of Cyprus (RoC) citizenship and EU benefits creates a "loophole" enabling them to evade Turkish influence. Additionally, RoC plays a crucial role as a democratic "yardstick", creating competitive pressure that limits Turkey's ability to impose its political system. This produces a careful balance where Turkey provides essential support while tolerating greater political freedoms in Northern Cyprus than in Turkey itself. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with local actors, This case study contributes to broader discussions on *de facto* states by demonstrating that client states can cultivate independent political cultures despite external dependence.

Keywords: *de facto* states, unrecognized states, patron states, loophole, yardstick

Introduction

Under the current international order, based on mutually recognized sovereign states, unrecognized states exist in an unstable and vulnerable position. These entities, often born from conflict or interstate turmoil, are commonly viewed as mere puppets, their strings pulled by powerful patron states, who provide economic, diplomatic and security assistances. Conventional perspectives have shown that without the support from their benefactors, these fragile states could quickly collapse. But what if this narrative doesn't tell the whole story?

Some *de facto* states demonstrate a capacity for independence and, in some cases, surpass their patrons in the realm of civil liberties and democratic freedoms. For example, Northern Cyprus, recognized only by Turkey, presents an interesting paradox. As we scrutinize the patron-client relations of Turkey and Northern Cyprus, we will find that the latter has forged its own path, developing a distinct society, different from Turkey in terms of political freedom and civil liberties. How has this small, isolated entity managed to enjoy greater freedom than its patron? And perhaps most puzzlingly, why would patron states allow, or even enable, such a freedom to flourish?

In this article, we address this puzzle by examining how and why Northern Cyprus, despite its heavy dependence on Turkey, has been able to maintain a more liberal and democratic political system than Turkey itself, utilizing primary data gathered through extensive fieldwork and over 30 semi-structured interviews in Cyprus. We argue that this paradox is facilitated by several factors: Turkish Cypriots' unique access to the European Union (EU) via Republic of Cyprus (RoC) citizenship, Turkish Cypriot well-entrenched democratic institutions and civil society, and strategic self-restraint exercised by Turkey. By exploring these dynamics, our study offers a new perspective on patron–client relations—demonstrating that a patron may tolerate or even enable greater freedoms in its client under certain conditions.

Patron-Client Relationship Between Recognized States

Social science disciplines have studied patron-client relationships throughout history. Originally, historians developed the patron-client concept to explain social and political structures in ancient Mediterranean empires like the Roman Empire. Anthropologists later applied this framework to pre-modern tribal communities, where leaders (patrons) provided assistance to followers (clients) in exchange for loyalty. Over time, the patron-client model extended beyond its historical roots to illustrate power dynamics between modern states (Kolstø 2020).

Scholars who study patron-client relationships of sovereign states in international politics have characterized their relations by conceptualizing asymmetry, reciprocity, affectivity, and compliance between stronger (patron) and weaker (client) states. Lemarchand and Legg (1972) framed patron–client ties as personalized, affective, and reciprocal relations in which patrons invoke "mutual benefits" while leveraging superior resources. Shoemaker and Spanier (1984) then cast the relationship as a "negotiated exchange"—security or economic aid from the patron for the client's strategic or ideological alignment. Carney (1989) operationalized compliance, noting clients' tendency to follow the patron's lead in arenas such as United Nations (UN) voting. Subsequent work emphasized the structural asymmetry at the core of the "dyadic relationships" (Veenendaal 2014), while more recent studies refined the affective dimension by distinguishing cultural-kin bonds from material reciprocity (Berg and Yüksel 2022).

Patron states expect loyalty benefits such as ideological convergence, international solidarity, and strategic advantages from their clients. Importantly, these alliances are not rigid; they form "fuzzy, fluid, fluctuating" partnerships that shift with changing geopolitical contexts

and evolving needs on both sides (Carney 1989). Rather than one-sided control, patron-client ties function as a bargaining relationship in which both sides negotiate concessions (Shoemaker and Spanier 1984).

During the Cold War, scholars observed that small states leveraged their equal status as member states in international organizations as a survival strategy amid superpower rivalry (Rothstein 1966; Vital 1971). Many weaker states closely aligned with their patrons' ideologies, foreign policies, and voting patterns.

In the post-Cold War era, however, patron-client dynamics shifted: patrons tied foreign aid to democracy and human rights reforms in client states (values-based diplomacy) while also pursuing strategic advantages from clients occupying vital geostrategic locations. For example, a patron might gain access to a client's exclusive economic zone (EEZ) or establish a military base on the client's territory, bolstering the patron's security and economy (Veenendaal 2017; Berg and Yüksel 2022).

De Facto States and Patron-Client Dynamics

The collapse of the Soviet Union brought increased attention to unrecognized states or so-called *de facto* states that have achieved quasi-independence but lack international recognition. Scholars have developed various definitions for these entities, which break away from an internationally recognized parent state, typically due to conflict and manage to maintain control over a defined territory by receiving external support. These states often rely heavily on patron states for survival and international engagement, as they have no alternative but to depend on their patrons for economic, diplomatic, and security support (Caspersen 2009). Examples commonly identified as *de facto* states include Northern Cyprus and four cases in the post-Soviet space—Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Transnistria, and, until its dissolution in 2023, Nagorno-Karabakh.

In the academic literature, we have seen a proliferation of terminology for these entities. Other than "unrecognized" and "*de facto* states," some scholar uses "contested" or "quasi states" (e.g. Pegg 1998; Lynch 2002; Kolstø 2006; Caspersen 2012; Kyris 2012). Each term reflects different scholarly criteria: for instance, some researchers emphasize effective institution-building, control of territory, and a minimum period of successful self-governance (e.g. at least two years) as criteria for classifying a *de facto* state (Caspersen 2012). Others offer simpler definitions; for example, Kyris (2018) defines these contested entities as the ones pursuing or maintaining independent statehood over a defined territory without being members of the UN. While many researchers adopt narrow definitions that describe *de facto* states as secessionist entities with contested sovereignties that control territory and provide governance over an extended period of time, Bryant and Hatay (2020) take a broader approach to the concept. They observe in Northern Cyprus that in everyday life people tend to prefix "*de facto*" to virtually everything about such places—*de facto* police, *de facto* courts, *de facto* borders—underscoring how deeply their unofficial status permeates daily reality and suggesting a more expansive understanding of what constitutes *de facto* statehood. In this article, we use "unrecognized state" and "*de facto* state" interchangeably, but with a mindful

distinction. The term "unrecognized" is precise when highlighting the lack of formal diplomatic recognition, whereas "*de facto*" is preferable when emphasizing the realities on the ground. In other words, "*de facto* state" conveys that this territory functions as state in practice even as it remains illegitimate or invisible in the eyes of international law. Additionally, for the purposes of this study, we define a "*de facto* state" as an entity that has established effective internal sovereignty over a territory without broad international recognition of its independence.

Patrons often involve themselves in the internal politics of their client but this leads to a complex balancing act where *de facto* states must manage their dependence on patrons because they aspire to independence and international recognition (Caspersen 2009). Unlike recognized small states that can leverage membership and voting in international organizations, unrecognized polities face significant constraints on external action.

However, recent scholarship underscores that patron–client ties in the post–Cold War era are not static: patrons often temper their control due to international scrutiny and normative commitments, while clients may leverage any available external links or internal social resilience to maintain autonomy. Ó Beacháin (2012) challenges the "pawn-of-the-patron" view of *de facto* states by analyzing Abkhazia's electoral politics, concluding that its electoral dynamics reflect meaningful domestic agency rather than simple patron control. Kolstø (2020) argues that in the post-Cold War era, patron states have become more restrained in their approach to client *de facto* states, partly due to international legal norms against secession. Research from these perspectives have focused on the resilience of *de facto* states, such as their ability to elect candidates or parties disfavored by the patron state in elections or civil society resistance movements led by non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Furthermore, Kyris' study points out that degrees and types of external recognition, and the practices of recognizers such as the EU, interact with domestic agency and institutions in *de facto* polities (Kyris 2018).

While scholars have noted instances of patrons tolerating some divergence, our study contributes new insight by documenting a case where the client's democracy outpaces that of the patron. This goes beyond existing complexity arguments by showing that structural and geopolitical factors, such as the presence of a democratic parent state and the client population's external citizenship benefits, can lead a patron to deliberately refrain from imposing authoritarian norms, resulting in a freer client state. Building on such studies, we focus on the democratic outcomes of these dynamics, an angle that reveals how, under certain conditions, a client's political system can outperform that of the patron in terms of freedoms.

Challenging the Current Gaps: The Case of Turkey and Northern Cyprus

The Turkey–Northern Cyprus relationship challenges conventional patron–client expectations. Whereas client polities typically mirror or fall below their patrons' democratic standards, Northern Cyprus has often surpassed its patron in political freedoms.

The northern part of Cyprus has been heavily dependent on Turkey since 1974, following the events that led to the island's *de facto* partition. The "Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC)," proclaimed in 1983, is recognized only by Turkey; the international community

treats its territory as part of the Republic of Cyprus (RoC), contributing to long-term economic isolation. Under such circumstances, Turkey's influence is paramount, including appointments to key posts such as the military and central bank, making Ankara's support vital to the north's survival. Yet, despite this dependency, Northern Cyprus has maintained a political environment measurably freer than Turkey's.

According to the Freedom House, which measures each country's degree of political rights and civil liberties with a yearly report of "Freedom in the World," it rates Northern Cyprus as "Free" with 76/100 in 2024, while Turkey scores 33/100 ("Not Free") (Freedom House: Northern Cyprus 2024; Turkey 2024). Since 2017 Northern Cyprus has ranged 81–76, compared to Turkey's 38–31. Under the leadership of the pro-reunification Mustafa Akıncı (2018–2020), Northern Cyprus reached 81 (political rights (PR) 31/40; civil liberties (CL) 50/60. By 2024, its subscores had edged down (PR 27; CL 49) but remained far above Turkey's (PR 17; CL 16). These patterns underscore that dependence need not translate into political convergence: clients can diverge substantially from patrons and selectively resist pressure (Freedom House: Northern Cyprus 2017-2024; Turkey 2017-2024). These data do not support the orthodox view of patron–client relations as a one-way hierarchy in which a dominant patron dictates and a weak client simply complies. Instead, it demonstrates that patrons and clients can develop divergent political cultures, even when the client is heavily dependent on the patron for survival. A patron's influence on its client's internal politics may not be as constraining as often assumed, and client states may selectively adopt or resist aspects of their patron's pressure.

Then, why has Northern Cyprus sustained greater openness and liberty? Relative to many unrecognized polities, it retains established institutions—a multiparty system, a capable bureaucracy, and a judiciary with meaningful autonomy—alongside an active civil society that monitors and contests external influence (Freedom House 2024: Northern Cyprus). Moreover, its desire to gain international recognition may motivate it to maintain higher standards of democracy and freedom than its patron. Taken together, the case illustrates how dependency and autonomy can coexist, and how external benchmarks and internal resilience enable a client polity to maintain a comparatively liberal order despite patron dominance.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative single-case research design, grounded in extensive fieldwork conducted between 2021 and 2024 in Cyprus, on both sides of the "Green Line". [1] We combined participant observation with semi-structured interviews to gather data on the perspectives of local actors. In total, we conducted over 30 in-depth interviews with a diverse range of Turkish Cypriot respondents, including journalists, civil society activists, former officials, academics, trade union leaders, and ordinary citizens. These interviews — conducted in Turkish or English as appropriate — explored views on politics, the influence of Turkey, religious and

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1   This study received ethical approval from Bilkent University Ethics Committee. All participants provided informed consent, and their identities have been anonymized to ensure confidentiality in accordance with ethical research standards.

cultural identity, and day-to-day governance in the Turkish Cypriot community. Interviewees are referred to anonymously in this text in line with ethical guidelines to protect their privacy. This prolonged engagement in the field allowed us to supplement documentary research with first-hand ethnographic observation of daily life and community dynamics.

Our data sources include (i) official policy documents and agreements, (ii) media reports and news archives, (iii) academic literature on patron–client relations and on Northern Cyprus/Turkey, and (iv) evidence from our fieldwork and interviews. By triangulating these sources, we have attempted to ensure a robust and well-rounded analysis. We have integrated insights from interviews directly into the discussion, using quotations where they illuminate local attitudes or illustrate resistance to patronal influence. Whenever an interview quote or observation is presented, it is explicitly linked to the argument at hand, demonstrating how grassroots perspectives support our claims. Through this approach, the fieldwork is not an afterthought but a core component of our research, providing empirical grounding for the article's findings. The use of local voices and experiences adds depth to our analysis of how and why the Turkish Cypriot Community has preserved greater freedom despite its dependence on Turkey.

Historical Background

The Cyprus problem emerged and drew international attention in the 1950s when Greek Cypriots challenged British colonial rule and sought unification with Greece (*enosis*). At the same time, Turkish Cypriots, supported by Turkey, opposed this move and favored partition (*taksim*). The island gained its independence in 1960, establishing a power-sharing government between the two communities. However, after the 1960 independence, a constitutional breakdown in late 1963 triggered intercommunal violence and the *de facto* separation of the two communities. The UN deployed peacekeepers (UNFICYP) in 1964 to stabilize the situation. Following an escalation in 1967, the conflict peaked in July 1974 when a coup backed by the Greek military junta sought union with Greece. Invoking its rights and responsibilities under the 1960 Treaty of Guarantee, Turkey intervened as a guarantor power. Turkey's military operation resulted in the island's *de facto* partition—the north under Turkish and Turkish Cypriot control, the south under a Greek Cypriot-controlled RoC. On 15 November 1983, the "TRNC" declared independence, recognized only by Turkey; the UN Security Council condemned the declaration and affirmed the RoC's sovereignty over the entire island (e.g., Security Council Resolution. 541(1983) and 550 (1984)) (Hale 2013).

Historically, Turkey's Cyprus policy was dominated by two key issues: its own security concerns and the protection of Turkish Cypriots, framed within the context of a "national cause". This stance aligned closely with the position of Rauf Denktaş, the long-standing leader of the Turkish Cypriot community, who advocated for a two-state solution in defiance of UN Security Council resolutions. The rise of *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* (Justice and Development Party, AKP) in 2002 initially shifted Turkey's Cyprus problem course: to advance EU accession, Ankara backed a bi-communal, bi-zonal federation and EU-oriented reforms, breaking with its long-standing Cyprus policy of "the lack of a solution is the solution (*çözümsüzlük çözümdür*)" (Hale 2013; Bryant and Hatay 2015).

The UN-drafted Annan Plan (2004) represented a crucial moment in the Cyprus peace process. Turkey's new Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan backed it, seeing EU membership for a united Cyprus as a pathway to Turkey's own accession. Yet 64.9% of Turkish Cypriots voted "yes" while 75.8% of Greek Cypriots voted "no," and the plan failed. Domestic dynamics mattered for the result: in the north, mass pro-unification rallies and pro-solution parties pressured the long-entrenched hardliner Denktaş; on the Greek Cypriot side, his hardline counterpart, President Tassos Papadopoulos led the "no" campaign. The Republic of Cyprus then entered the EU a week later without a settlement, which eventually stalled EU–Turkey talks. Against this backdrop, the AKP administration's Cyprus policy gradually shifted to the pre-2004 Turkish official policy; after the UN-brokered Crans-Montana talks collapsed in July 2017, the AKP reverted toward its pre-AKP approach (Bryant 2004; Dayıoğlu, Çıraklı and Koldaş 2021).

A Gap in Political Freedoms

To better understand the differences between Turkey and Northern Cyprus, it is important to explore the differences in their domestic political sphere. In Turkey, the left to right spectrum distinction is mainly defined by politics based on fault lines such as Kemalism and political Islam, while toleration towards dissidence is rather low. On the other hand, in Northern Cyprus, the primary political fault line is between pro-reunification forces, which favor joining the EU as part of a united Cyprus, and pro-independence groups that prefer reinforcing ties with Turkey.

Political freedoms also diverge. In Turkey, interference intensified after the March 2024 local elections: elected the People's Equality and Democracy Party (*Halkların Eşitlik ve Demokrasi Partisi*, DEM) mayors were removed and replaced by government-appointed trustees (*kayyum*) on alleged terrorism grounds (Reuters 2024). Beyond local government, opposition activity faces tighter constraints—parliament stripped a member of his seat despite a Constitutional Court ruling; police repeatedly banned and dispersed May Day and Pride events, detaining hundreds; and in 2025 Istanbul's opposition mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu was jailed, triggering mass protests (Al Jazeera 2025). Opposition media and satire were also targeted. In short, space for opposition in Turkey has significantly narrowed.

Article 26 of the Turkish Constitution protects freedom of expression in Turkey (The Grand National Assembly of Turkey Department of Laws and Resolutions 2019). However, this protection has weakened in practice, especially after the 2016 coup attempt. As a result, many journalists now practice self-censorship. It is estimated that over 90% of Turkey's media is now pro-government, carefully avoiding news unfavorable to the government or high-ranking officials (Freedom House 2023). Furthermore, Turkish opposition parties and their leaders often face threats and investigations for alleged insults against President Erdoğan or high-ranking AKP officials as well as accusations of links with terrorist organizations such as the PKK and the Gülen movement, the group accused to have orchestrated the failed coup attempt of 15 July 2016 (TRT World 2017). Limitations of political freedoms extend beyond political opponents to encompass journalists, academics and ordinary citizens. Individuals can

face detention or arrest for social media posts deemed to "insult the President," "spread terrorist propaganda" or "support terrorist organizations," often without requiring clear evidence of wrongdoings (Human Rights Watch Report 2018).

In stark contrast, Northern Cyprus enjoys a political environment relatively free from such threats and discrimination based on ethnic or religious identity. The political discourse there centers on the reunification issue rather than accusations of terrorism or secessionism. Turkish Cypriot media enjoys greater independence and diversity of viewpoints while some media has Turkish owners who are close to the AKP government. True, Turkish Cypriot journalists face challenges, particularly when criticizing their authorities or the Turkish government's policies, but the environment is far less repressive than in Turkey. Article 24 of Turkish Cypriot constitution guarantees freedom of thought and expression including freedom of the press and other forms of media (Ombudsman 1985). Censorship is prohibited and the media generally operate without the heavy-handed interference or pressure seen in Turkey. Although hardline nationalists in Turkey and in Northern Cyprus alike may deride pro-reunification advocates as "Greek Cypriot sympathizers" (*Rumcu* in Turkish), "traitors," or "separatists," these labels do not translate into criminal prosecution or systematic intimidation in Northern Cyprus.

Ankara's Influence and Local Reaction

Turkey's approach to influencing Northern Cyprus is not always characterized by strict enforcement or direct imposition. Rather, Turkey sometimes employs a softer or ambiguous approach, attempting to guide Northern Cyprus towards its preferred policies and religious norms (Ayberk et al. 2019). When met with strong local opposition, Turkey has shown a tendency to retreat temporarily, seemingly losing interest in contested issues rather than forcing compliance. On the other hand, Turkish Cypriots have demonstrated a capacity for resistance and self-assertion. When perceiving threats to their autonomy, secular traditions, or cultural identity, they have not hesitated to voice their opposition through large-scale demonstrations and other forms of protest. This active resistance has played a crucial role in maintaining the community's distinct identity and limiting the extent of Turkey's influence.

The lack of strong connections between opposition parties in Turkey and Northern Cyprus and the absence of visible foreign support for the Turkish Cypriot opposition also contributes to Ankara's reduced vigilance towards political activities. Turkey traditionally avoided intervening in elections in Northern Cyprus even though pro-unification parties became dominant. As a political scientist explained:

> "In the past, Northern Cyprus could turn against Turkey over its Islamic policies and other unfavorable policies, but Turkey also treated us with a certain amount of respect. The policies of Northern Cyprus and the protests of its people even changed the stance of the Turkish government." (Interview with political scientist, 12 December 2023)

Scholars have pointed out that the AKP administration has deepened its engagement with Northern Cyprus following the failure of the Crans Montana negotiation in 2017. This

culminated with the right-wing National Unity Party's (*Ulusal Birlik Partisi*, UBP) candidate Ersin Tatar's victory against Mustafa Akıncı, the former president of Northern Cyprus, at the presidential election in October 2020. This was considered a "critical juncture" because Turkey overtly intervened in the election, by orchestrating negative campaigning against pro-reunification factions and providing financial support to Tatar's side, contributing to his narrow victory with 51.5% of the vote against Akıncı's 48.5% (Berg and Yüksel 2022).

Client's Subtle and Overt Resistance against Assimilation Plans

From 1974 to the early 1980s, the Turkish government encouraged the settlement of Turks in northern Cyprus as a matter of national policy. This first wave initially involved rural populations from the Black Sea and Mediterranean regions where farmers had suffered from lack of suitable farmland, later expanding to central and eastern Turkey (Kurtuluş and Purkıs 2014). The second phase (1980-1999) brought both rural peasants and urban white-collar workers driven by individual economic needs under limited legal frameworks without political and economic privileges from the authorities (Kurtuluş and Purkıs, 2014; Vural et al. 2015). The third wave (2000s-present) consists of economic migrants arriving without government backing, seeking citizenship to access political and economic rights on their own (Vural et al. 2015). Although no census has been conducted in Northern Cyprus since 2011, the estimated population in 2024 was about 399.000, up from about 280.000 in 2011 (Kuzey Kıbrıs Türk Cumhuriyeti İstatistik Kurumu 2024). Despite the lack of official data, it is widely believed that Turkish immigrants and their descendants now outnumber the indigenous Turkish Cypriot population. The focus of Ankara prior to the AKP was on increasing the population of the Turkish Cypriot community and settling the territories where Greek Cypriots were displaced from. In contrast, the AKP government has actively encouraged the migration of conservative Turks. These immigrants have played a crucial role in spreading Islamic practices and garnering support for the AKP in Northern Cyprus (Kurtuluş and Purkıs 2014).

AKP has attempted to impose a more conservative, Islamist ideology on the traditionally secular Turkish Cypriot community. The right-wing UBP administration accelerated Islamization efforts after it won a single-party majority in 2009. Furthermore, the construction of large-scale mosques serves as a visible symbol of Turkey's cultural and religious influence. Traditionally, Turkish Cypriot mosques were modest structures, often without minarets or with only short ones, reflecting the community's historical coexistence with Greek Cypriots. During more than 300 years of Ottoman rule, only a few large mosques were built in Cyprus, all of which were churches converted into mosques with added minarets (Interview with journalist, 14 November 2023). Yet, since 2010, Turkey has funded the construction of imposing mosques with tall minarets, and this changed the scenery of Northern Cyprus. These mosques can accommodate thousands of people and were constructed in highly visible locations, such as near major road intersections, visually asserting the conservative Turkish presence in the region. It is estimated that there are now more than 200 mosques in Northern Cyprus, both large and small (Weise 2018).

However, this does not mean more people there started attending prayers at these mosques. Instead, Turkish Cypriots have shown resistance to Turkey's intentions to tighten

political control and engineer cultural change in their society. Secular Turkish Cypriots are highly critical of the proliferation of these mosques, and they have demonstrated strong resistance. Turkey's actions largely stopped at constructing the buildings, and significantly, Ankara did not enforce personal religious observance or mandate mosque attendance among the local population. Most of the worshippers at the new mosques are conservative immigrants from Turkey and other Muslims from foreign countries such as Pakistan and Syria. In contrast, Turkish Cypriots remain largely secular and do not have a habit of regular mosque attendance. A survey conducted by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation (*Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung*, FES) between January and February 2018 among 1,665 respondents (972 Turkish Cypriots and 693 Turkish immigrants) revealed stark differences in religious attitudes. When asked whether they attend mosques except for funerals, over 60% of Turkish Cypriots responded they do not attend, compared to only 25% of Turkish immigrants. Regarding building more mosques, 60% of Turkish Cypriots opposed compared to 30% of Turkish immigrants. Similarly, 64% of Turkish Cypriots opposed establishing more theology faculties versus 30% of Turkish immigrants. These findings demonstrate that Turkish Cypriots maintain their traditionally secular outlook, contrasting sharply with the more religious orientation of Turkish immigrants (Sonan et al. 2020). The following comment from a local resident reflects how secular citizens respond to Turkey's Islamic influence:

> "In our secular society of Northern Cyprus, an unnecessary number of mosques have been built. If only that money had been spent on building schools and hospitals. Mosques are the symbol of Turkey's rule, power, and supervision. We cannot stop the construction works funded by Turkey and carried out by Turkish companies. However, Turkey seems content with just erecting these grand structures without directly interfering with our personal religious practices. This is how we reconcile our frustration against Turkey and calmness in our minds." (Interview with journalist, 30 July 2023).

There have been instances of a strong backlash against Turkey's imposition of Islam. Looking at another example related to religion, Ankara gave pressure to introduce compulsory religious education in schools, establish Quran classes and "summer schools," dispatch religion teachers from Turkey, and open Islamic theology schools and departments in universities (Aygin 2023a). In 2017, a law was amended following Turkey's pressure which strengthened the independence of the religious affairs office and expanded its authority. This change facilitated the recruitment of Turkish religious officials and allowed them to engage in political activities (Latif 2020).

However, these Islamization efforts have met considerable resistance from the local population. In 2018, the "Cyprus Turkish Teachers' Union" (*Kıbrıs Türk Öğretmenler Sendikası*, KTÖS) opened a case against the regulations of Quran classes for children, insisting that those religious activities should be controlled by the Ministry of Education's authorities. In 2021, the Turkish Cypriot Constitutional Court supported their appeal. This decision provoked a strong reaction from Turkish President Erdoğan, who criticized the ruling as threatening the survival of Northern Cyprus and insisted that the authorities there should act as Turkey does in all aspects (Anadolu Agency 2021). Secular Turkish Cypriots openly

criticized Erdoğan's comments, with statements such as "We will not remain silent in the face of this crime committed against our children" (Aygin 2023a).

Despite Erdoğan's fury and strong words, Ankara did not intervene further. At the same time, Turkish authorities pursued greater religious visibility through mosque building and religious education, but these efforts met local resistance and have not fundamentally altered the secular habits of the local Turkish Cypriot population. Moreover, these episodes show that Turkish Cypriots can criticize Turkey without fear of investigation or arrest by organizing protests and demonstrations unlike people in Turkey.

Institutional Bulwarks against Oppression

There is a high degree of unionization in the Turkish Cypriot public sector. Just like the political fault line, left-wing unions have upheld reunification while right-wing ones have supported keeping independence and the status quo. Particularly, unions of the left-wing have a decisive say in the politics in the north, criticizing anti-reunification moves and Turkey's dominant role on the island. For instance, KTÖS is considered one of the most vocal trade unions in the north.

Turkey's AKP administration aspired to reform the large, budget-heavy Turkish Cypriot public sector, which had strong trade unions resistant to change. To achieve this, AKP changed its financial assistance approach, moving away from unconditional support to put terms and conditions. Ankara imposed austerity measures, including cuts to public spending and wage expenditures, while promoting privatization. In exchange for financial aid, it pressured the local authorities to pass three laws between 2008 and 2012, aiming at weakening the trade unions' influence and capacity (Ioannou and Sonan 2017).

However, until today, the unions there have remained powerful and are not afraid of confronting Turkey's policies. For instance, at the beginning of 2023, online news media reported that Turkey intends to spread conservative, Islamist education in the north by providing collective religious education to children at mosques in the north. This infuriated secular Turkish Cypriots, and their anger was directed towards the Turkish Cypriot authorities and Ankara. KTÖS criticized the opening of private Quran courses as "illegal cult houses." The Cyprus Turkish Secondary Education Teachers Union (*Kıbrıs Türk Orta Eğitim Öğretmenler Sendikası*, KTOEÖS) also condemned these activities. The union organized demonstrations together with opposition parties and non-governmental organizations, declaring "we will not turn into the country of sheikhs, dervishes, disciples and lunatics" (Aygin 2023b).

Another important civil society reaction occurred when the Turkish Ministry of Education revised primary school textbooks submitted by the Turkish Cypriot authorities for printing to be more Islamist-oriented. The KTÖS refused to use these books and filed a lawsuit against the Turkish Cypriot Ministry of Education, pledging not to use the textbooks until the final verdict was handed down. Opposition parties and civil society organizations joined KTÖS in organizing protests outside the Ministry (Yeni Düzen 2024). While in Turkey, demonstrations are often prohibited in advance, the Turkish Cypriot authorities still respect

the rights to protest and demonstrate, and the police generally do not intervene. Thus, in the Turkish Cypriot community, various groups stand as bastions of resistance against Turkey's increasingly assertive control.

It is also worthwhile to highlight differences between the judicial systems of Turkey and Northern Cyprus. The Constitution of Turkey contains provisions intended to ensure judicial independence and freedom of expression. Article 138 is crucial for judicial independence, stating that judges shall be independent in the discharge of their duties and shall render judgments in accordance with the law and their conscientious convictions (The Grand National Assembly of Turkey Department of Laws and Resolutions 2019). In practice, however, these safeguards have been undermined in Turkey, especially in recent years. Northern Cyprus, for its part, inherited a common law judicial tradition and maintains a high degree of judicial independence in practice, free from the sweeping purges and political pressures that have affected the Turkish judiciary (Council of Europe 2020). The contrast in judicial climates is another factor that helps explain why Turkish Cypriots experience a freer environment than citizens in Turkey and the rule of law is stronger. One interviewee explained this attitude of judiciary, pointing out the following:

> "Under British rule, a legal and administrative system was established based on the United Kingdom's [UK] democratic system, emphasizing the rule of law, judicial independence, and freedom of expression. This legacy has helped to create a legal culture that resists external interference. Furthermore, the Turkish Cypriot legal and political elite, many of whom were educated in the UK and under the British legal tradition, indoctrinated the importance of the democratic values." (Interview with former official, 8 August 2023).

Parent as a Democratic "Yardstick" and Patron's Tolerant Attitude

As we have seen, Northern Cyprus occupies an interesting position among unrecognized states. Despite its heavy dependence on Turkey, it has maintained greater political freedom than its patron. This challenges conventional views of patron–client relationships, where the client state is usually presumed to be more constrained by the patron. According to Freedom House evaluations in 2024, Turkey is classified as "not free" and increasingly authoritarian, while Northern Cyprus has consistently been rated "free" over the past decade (Freedom House: Northern Cyprus 2024; Turkey 2024). This anomalous situation becomes more comprehensible when we consider the parent state of Northern Cyprus, RoC, as a "yardstick" in this relationship.

RoC serves as an important democratic benchmark that indirectly constrains Turkey's authoritarian influence in the North. With Freedom House scores consistently in the 90s, EU-member RoC represents a stable democratic alternative that Turkey cannot afford to ignore. This sets a dilemma for Ankara: while maintaining control over the North, Ankara must ensure the territory remains sufficiently democratic to prevent Turkish Cypriots from shifting their allegiance southward—an outcome that would be a geopolitical fiasco for Turkey. Despite its increasingly weakening democratic institutions, Turkey adopts a more

tolerant approach toward the community, partly because Turkey frequently champions democratic values in its own official rhetoric and cannot openly vilify the robust democratic institutions of RoC. As a result, Turkey tolerates greater political freedom in Northern Cyprus than in Turkey itself.

Turkey's relative tolerance is evident in its financial support since the establishment of the "TRNC" in 1983. Despite occasional attempts to leverage assistance for political concessions, it has not withdrawn this lifeline. The Turkish Cypriot public servants receive higher salaries than their Turkish counterparts, yet Turkey continues subsidizing these wages (Bozkurt 2015). This enduring support, even without full control, underscores Turkey's balancing act. On the one hand, the RoC's policy of non-recognition and the resulting international isolation of the North have increased the Turkish Cypriots' economic dependence on Turkey, which could have empowered Ankara to impose its will more forcefully (Özyiğit and Eminer 2021). On the other hand, the very presence of a prosperous, democratic EU member state on the same island creates incentives for Turkey to show restraint.

Turkish Cypriots have a viable alternative model next door and a safety valve through their access to the south. Under the 1967 Citizenship Law, children with at least one Cypriot parent acquire citizenship; Turkish Cypriots resident on the island before division and their descendants therefore qualify. As a result, by 2021 the RoC had issued more than 97,000 passports to Turkish Cypriots, conferring EU rights to live, work, study, and travel (International Crisis Group 2023). This "loophole" of EU citizenship enables many Turkish Cypriots to bypass the restrictions of isolation and reduces their reliance on Turkey's patronage. The unique position of Turkish Cypriots as citizens of RoC makes this possible. Turkish Cypriots often hold multiple passports, including those from Northern Cyprus, Turkey, and RoC. According to the 2024 Henley & Partners Passport Index, RoC passport ranks 13th globally, allowing visa-free travel to 178 countries, while the Turkish passport ranks 45th, providing access to 116 countries (Henley and Partners 2024). The recent economic downturn in Turkey has made it more difficult for Turkish passport holders to obtain Schengen visas, with rejection rates rising from 4.4% in 2014 to 16.1% in 2023 (Shabani 2024). In contrast, Turkish Cypriots with RoC passports can travel and settle freely within the EU, making their Turkish passports less valuable. Some Turkish Cypriots have even mentioned that they do not plan to renew their Turkish passports upon expiration (Interview with lawyer, 31 January 2023). Under these circumstances, Turkey, in turn, must be cautious: overly repressive policies could push Turkish Cypriots to more actively embrace the south or even emigrate, undermining Turkey's influence. In other words, while the strict non-recognition by the RoC ties Northern Cyprus closer to Turkey for survival, the openness of the RoC and the EU to Turkish Cypriots pulls in the opposite direction, moderating Ankara's behavior.

The resulting equilibrium defies conventional patron–client models. While Turkey provides essential economic and security support to Northern Cyprus, it must exercise restraint rather than simply imposing its will, unlike a typical patron state in a closed system. Thus, RoC's role as a democratic "yardstick" has indirectly contributed to preserving political freedoms in the Turkish Cypriot community, yielding an unusual case where a client state does not simply adopt the political system of its patron.

Furthermore, Ankara's relative "hands-off" approach to the Turkish Cypriot civil society and institutions can be attributed to pragmatic calculations. In many *de facto* states, patron governments impose various pressures and regulatory constraints on local NGOs, especially those receiving foreign support. In contrast, Turkey has generally been cautious about clamping down on NGOs and civil society in Northern Cyprus. This can be explained by several factors. First, during the 2000s, Turkey's leadership was mindful of its EU accession aspirations; any blatant authoritarian intervention in Cyprus would have drawn international criticism at a sensitive time. Second, the Turkish Cypriot community possesses a strong, well-established civil society with roots in its decades of democratic political culture, stretching back to the British colonial era and the power-sharing RoC period. Tightened oversight by Turkey would likely provoke fierce local backlash and diminish the very influence Turkey seeks to maintain. Third, international actors such as the EU, the United States, and various European countries provide support to civil society in the North—but they do so cautiously, wary of provoking disputes with the RoC or being seen as legitimizing the "TRNC". The relatively low-profile nature of this external support means Ankara perceives less of the kind of "foreign meddling" in the North that it often suspects (rightly or wrongly) in Turkish domestic NGOs. Finally, Turkey's strategic interests differ between its own territory and its client state: pushing too hard in Northern Cyprus could backfire by fueling local resentment or causing problems with other countries that undermine Turkey's broader goals for Cyprus. In summary, Ankara shows restraint in the client state not because it has developed respect for democratic values, but because it understands the practical limits and risks of going too far under the pragmatic calculation. Turkey generally avoids using the same heavy-handed repression in Northern Cyprus that it uses at home, believing that a more moderate approach will better protect its long-term control over the territory.

It should be noted, however, that the RoC's long-standing policy of strict non-recognition and external isolation has had a double-edged effect: by constraining Turkish Cypriot access to international markets and institutions, it has tended to deepen the client state's material reliance on Turkey, reinforcing a form of patronal tutelage that may undercut democratic quality (Ayberk et al. 2023). Acknowledging this dependence track makes it clear that the yardstick and dependence mechanisms operate in parallel, rather than in a simple linear sequence.

Conclusion

The Turkey-Northern Cyprus relationship demonstrates that patron-client relations are not always strictly characterized by asymmetry, reciprocity, affectivity and compliance. Instead, clients can develop distinct political cultures and maintain higher levels of freedom than their patrons, even while relying on them for survival. This suggests that the internal dynamics of client states, including the role of civil society and established political institutions, play a crucial role in shaping the nature of these relationships. In addition, the RoC helps shape the Turkish Cypriot political environment by acting as a democratic "yardstick". Its strong democratic institutions limit Turkey's ability to exert complete authoritarian control, as Turkey

must allow a degree of political freedom to prevent Turkish Cypriots from turning toward the RoC. This highlights the influence of the parent state, which can indirectly moderate patron-client relationships, even when the patron state itself exhibits increasingly autocratic tendencies.

The case of Turkey and Northern Cyprus suggests the need for more flexible models of patron–client relations that account for the agency and internal dynamics of both patrons and clients including the patron's strategic retreat and tolerance under certain conditions. Turkey's attempts to exert control and promote its ideology, particularly under the AKP administration, are not always implemented with strict enforcement. When met with strong local opposition, Turkey tends to step back, seemingly losing interest in the contested issue rather than forcing compliance. Rather, it reveals a calibrated strategy: Ankara pushes its agenda only so far, but backs down when the price becomes too high such as when it faces local protests or international criticism.

Conversely, Turkish Cypriots have demonstrated a strong capacity for resistance and self-assertion. When perceiving threats to their autonomy, secular traditions, or identity, they have not hesitated to oppose Ankara through mass protests, legal action, and other forms of civic mobilization. The unique position of Turkish Cypriots with access to RoC citizenship and the associated EU benefits creates a "loophole," that is, alternative outlet that enables them to evade Turkish influence and seek closer ties with Europe. This situation subtly undermines Turkey's ability to exert full control over the North, producing more delicate dynamics than typically seen in patron–client relationships. In other words, Turkey must exercise restraint and caution rather than simply imposing its will, as might be expected in more conventional patron–client scenarios.

This article has examined the distinct political dynamics that have evolved within the patron–client relationship of Turkey and Northern Cyprus. While Turkey's domestic politics are characterized by close monitoring of opposition and an acute focus on security threats, the client state enjoys a relatively more open political environment. The presence of the parent state of RoC as a "yardstick" helps explain this disparity, by creating indirect constraints that limit Turkey's ability to fully export its illiberal practices to the North. The findings here indicate that even in situations of extreme dependency, the interplay of external incentives and internal societal strength can allow a client to carve out political freedoms that defy its patron's less democratic trends.

The Cyprus case thus travels: democratic yardsticks and mobility loopholes can temper the ambitions of dominant patrons in other settings as well. Future research could explore the mechanisms allowing other *de facto* states to maintain their relative freedom despite dependence on their patrons. Studies might examine how the presence of a democratic parent state or other external anchors influences the political development of unrecognized territories in different contexts. In addition, it would be worthwhile to investigate the long-term implications of divergent political cultures between patrons and clients for the evolution or transformation of their relationships.

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