Norwegian Institute of International Affairs

POLICY BRIEF – 22 / 2026



Torn between Security, Dependence and Autonomy:

Turkish Cypriot Public Opinion on Türkiye's Role in the North of Cyprus

Sinem Arslan and Nina Caspersen

Summary

De facto states lacking international recognition rely on external patrons for survival, giving them leverage over local politics. However, this leverage may be limited when local preferences diverge. Drawing on a survey and elite interviews in the self-declared Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, this report explains how Turkish Cypriots' reliance on Türkiye for security coexists with opposition to Ankara's political intervention, shaping electoral preferences at odds with patron's interests. Security concerns sustain dependence, while demands for autonomy persist. The findings call for security guarantees in UN-led reunification efforts, and respect for Turkish Cypriot political autonomy.

During the 2020 and 2025 leadership elections in the self-declared Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC), the de facto entity's patron Türkiye intervened openly in support of Ersin Tatar. Contrary to the UN-backed settlement framework envisioning a bi-zonal, bi-communal federation, Tatar endorsed the two-state solution that Ankara has promoted since the collapse of the Crans-Montana peace talks. Türkiye's 2020 intervention was reportedly conducted through the National Intelligence Organisation (MİT), the Turkish embassy, and the Turkish military. Despite leading the polls, the incumbent leader Mustafa Akıncı lost the election. In 2025, Turkish politicians travelled again to the island to campaign on behalf of Tatar and reinforce Ankara's commitment to the two-state framework. Türkiye had not previously intervened in TRNC elections with such intensity, but its efforts to shape Turkish Cypriot politics extend back decades and have largely proven effective.

Even so, the 2025 elections defied Ankara's expectations, delivering a victory for Tufan Erhürman, who built a coalition including voters who do not share his vision on Cyprus reunification, indicating that factors beyond the Cyprus Question shaped the outcome. The results point

to a dynamic shaping voter preference. Turkish Cypriots favour leaders who maintain cooperative ties with Türkiye, provided that such relations do not compromise their autonomy. The *Dynamics of De Facto States: Patron–Client Relations* project, funded by the Research Council of Norway, examined this dynamic through a representative survey and 80 elite interviews conducted between 2023 and 2026. The findings reveal a tension between security-driven dependence on Türkiye and growing dissatisfaction with its intervention.

From Military Intervention to Structural Dependence: Türkiye in the North of Cyprus

Türkiye's systematic engagement with the Cyprus Question began with the internationalization of the issue at the UN General Assembly amid Greek Cypriot demands for *enosis* (union with Greece). In the wake of intercommunal clashes between Greek and Turkish Cypriots, Türkiye supported the paramilitary Turkish Resistance Organisation (TMT) and later became one of the guarantors of the 1960 Republic of Cyprus, alongside the United Kingdom and Greece. Following the constitutional breakdown in 1963, escalating intercommunal violence, and a coup d'état, Türkiye carried out two military interventions in 1974, citing its intervention rights under the Treaty of Guarantee.

Türkiye is the only country recognising the establishment of the 1983 de facto state of TRNC, which was deemed legally invalid by UN Security Council Resolution 541. International isolation, imposed on the Turkish Cypriot community following UNSC resolutions and rulings by the Court of Justice of the European Union, has entrenched the de facto entity's dependence on Türkiye. The north of Cyprus is connected to the outside world via Turkish telephone, postal codes, and internet domains. Türkiye maintains a significant number of troops on the island under the Cyprus Turkish Peace Force Command and Transitional Article 10 of the TRNC Constitution cedes the entity's security to the Turkish military.

The Turkish Cypriot economy remains heavily dependent on Türkiye's financial and infrastructural support. The governor of the Central Bank is appointed under the authority of Türkiye, which retains effective control over the entity's monetary policy. TRNC politicians note that reliance on the Turkish lira exposes the economy to deficits, while Ankara's ability to withhold funds grants it significant leverage over local politics. Maintaining Ankara's support is therefore important for the political elite. Many local politicians complain that Türkiye's interference has become institutionalised over time, to the extent that advisers within the Turkish embassy act as a "shadow cabinet" and frequently intervene in decision-making while seeking to retain their autonomy. However, others proudly acknowledge that they owe their political positions to Ankara or justify the controversial privatisation of TRNC infrastructure to Turkish companies without competitive bidding as implementing the Turkish president's directives.

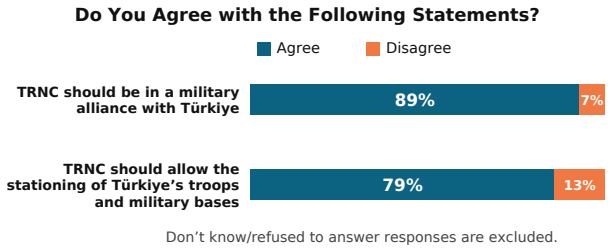
Beyond political, military, and economic intervention, Türkiye has sought to reshape northern Cyprus' social fabric. Migration to the TRNC has been encouraged and continues to be supervised by Türkiye. Politicians assert that they receive directives to ease citizenship procedures, though these remain contingent on Türkiye's security clearance, whereas business circles report that certain loans and commercial deals are more accessible to Turkish citizens. In recent years, provisions for the construction of mosques and religious schools have been incorporated into the Economic and Financial Cooperation Protocols that regulate bilateral economic relations. The proliferation of Islamic foundations, the inclusion of Islamic elements in textbooks, and the promotion of headscarf use in high schools indicate efforts to transform the historically secular Turkish Cypriot community along Islamic norms.

Persistent Security Concerns and Broad Support for Türkiye's Military Presence

The patron's intervention has shaped voter preferences, though attitudes reflect the entity's isolated status. Survey results indicate that security concerns remain prevalent, with 81% of respondents still fearing renewed conflict despite the post-1974 status quo and the presence of Turkish troops and a UN peacekeeping force. Results also show continuing intercommunal distrust with 72% of Turkish Cypriots reporting a lack of trust in the President of the Republic of Cyprus and 77% in Greek Cypriots. Interviews suggest these concerns have intensified amid the Republic of Cyprus' recent security partnerships with Israel, Greece, the United States, India, France and Gulf states. Together with regional conflicts and nationalist rhetoric occasionally voiced by Greek Cypriot political actors, these dynamics have reinforced cross-party anxieties, including fears of the entity's potential "Palestinization."

Within a context of insecurity, confidence in international actors is low: 71% view the UN as ineffective at resolving the Cyprus issue, and 59% consider the guarantor states unreliable for finding a peaceful settlement. Turkish Cypriot elites attribute this to UNSC resolutions, continued isolation, and the Republic of Cyprus' EU accession despite Greek Cypriot rejection of the Annan Plan. This perception positions Türkiye as a reliable ally, with 67% identifying it as the de facto entity's main friend and 88%

supporting positive relations. Although the presence of Turkish troops represents an obstacle to a settlement, it is perceived as essential for security: 77% do not view it as problematic, 84% trust the Turkish military, making it the most trusted institution, and 79% support the continued stationing of Turkish troops and military bases. While one-fifth do not explicitly support the military presence, support for a military alliance with Türkiye reaches 89%, suggesting that security concerns extend even to those with reservations about Turkish troop deployment.



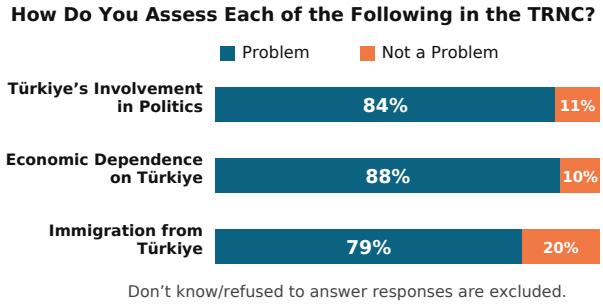
The presence of British military bases, rendering Cyprus a potential target during the 2026 Iran war, led even segments of the Turkish Cypriot left, generally more reserved about Türkiye's military presence, to welcome its F-16 deployment.

Dissatisfaction with Other Forms of Patron Intervention and Erosion of Political Agency

Widespread security concerns, coupled with the perception of Türkiye as both the primary source of support and a connection to the international system, as well as historically strong relations, contribute to a favourable view. Nevertheless, attitudes toward Türkiye are not entirely positive, as Turkish Cypriot perceptions are shaped by several factors. International isolation generates frustration, with 97% identifying the lack of international recognition as problematic, while Ankara is often seen as contributing to this isolation.

Furthermore, Türkiye's backing of the ruling coalition of the Democratic Party, the National Unity Party, and the Rebirth Party, which many voters associate with poor governance, corruption, and a fraudulent diploma scandal involving senior officials, has intensified negative perceptions. Reflecting widespread dissatisfaction, 82% rate the political system as functioning poorly and 86% say conditions are worsening. Respondents identify unemployment (98%), corruption (98%), democratic backsliding (96%), rising crime (98%) and lack of an effective healthcare system (99%) as key issues. Interviews indicate that Türkiye's reported role in the collapse of coalition governments, the replacement of Faiz Sucuoğlu with Ünal Üstel as prime minister, and repeated interventions in National Unity Party leadership contests have led the public to associate domestic problems with Türkiye.

Ankara's intervention in political, economic, and social affairs is widely perceived as an erosion of Turkish Cypriot autonomy and contributes to high levels of dissatisfaction: 88% of respondents express discontent with economic dependence on Türkiye, while 53% are concerned about the bilateral Economic and Financial Cooperation Protocols, which have incorporated clauses aimed at redesigning Turkish Cypriot social life. Similarly, 84% object to Türkiye's intervention in domestic politics, with 68% believing it interfered in the 2020 elections. These perceptions are noteworthy as political expression may lead to entry restrictions to Türkiye, while 89% of respondents find restrictions on freedom of expression problematic.



The population of Turkish-mainland origin constitutes another source of frustration. Although a heterogeneous group whose political preferences do not always align with Ankara's, they are perceived as supporting its political agenda. Consequently, 79% of respondents view immigration from Türkiye as problematic. Results show that respondents of Turkish-mainland origin (41.5% of the sample) share many of the same concerns as native Turkish Cypriots. Although more supportive of Türkiye's military presence (92%), 76% still view political intervention, 80% economic dependence, and 68% even immigration from Türkiye as problematic. Results also indicate that younger respondents, those with higher educational attainment, and individuals who define themselves as European or as more secular tend to adopt a more cautious stance toward Türkiye's intervention.

Backlash and the 2025 Election Result

Türkiye's intervention across all spheres of life in the TRNC has met with significant public backlash over time, sparking multiple societal protests. Key examples include the Societal Existence Rallies (2011), the March for Democracy and Will (2020), the No Picnic Over Pain Demonstrations (2020), and protests opposing the liberalisation of headscarf use in high schools (2025). The above-mentioned 2025 election results reflect this longer trajectory of societal contestation and accumulated grievances against the patron state.

This pattern extends across partisan lines. Among voters of parties advocating relations with Türkiye based on equality in the 2022 elections, 100% of Communal Democracy Party, Communal Liberation Party-New Forces, People's Party, and Independence Path voters and 95% of Republican Turkish Party voters consider Türkiye's intervention problematic.

Nevertheless, critical attitudes are also evident among supporters of the governing coalition, who have traditionally viewed Türkiye as the "motherland" within a hierarchical relationship and generally aligned with Ankara's policies. Dissatisfaction among voters of the Democratic Party (89%), the National Unity Party (77%), and the Rebirth Party (38%) regarding Türkiye's political intervention helps explain why Ersin Tatar was unable to consolidate the electoral base of the ruling coalition that supported his candidacy.

Overall, the findings indicate a broad reaction against the patron's intervention in domestic affairs. However, this coexists with persistent security concerns and isolation resulting from international non-recognition, which reinforces reliance on Türkiye. Together with long-standing cultural ties, these dynamics shape voter preferences in favour of maintaining good relations with Türkiye while simultaneously preserving political autonomy. Within this context, Erhürman's victory can be attributed in part to his ability to strategically balance these competing demands by acknowledging public concerns over sovereignty while avoiding a confrontational stance toward Türkiye during his election campaign.

Policy Implications

Persistent security concerns among Turkish Cypriots have implications for peace negotiations. Without credible security guarantees, a settlement is unlikely to gain support. Türkiye's military presence is incompatible with demilitarisation and full sovereignty, underscoring the need for UN-led security arrangements. Bicommunal confidence-building measures remain essential for rebuilding trust.

Economic isolation reinforces structural dependence on Türkiye. The EU should expand financial and technical assistance, including development funding, trade infrastructure, education, and civil society support. Without implying recognition, such engagement could reduce dependence and create more balanced conditions for reunification efforts.

The international community should strengthen civil society in the TRNC as a counterweight to patron-state influence. Supporting NGOs, academic cooperation, and regional partnerships could promote democratic practices, civic engagement, and diversified external relations.

The backlash reveals constraints on Türkiye's soft power and growing demands for reciprocal respect. The 2025 election signals widespread opposition to Ankara's increasingly interventionist policies, highlighting the importance of greater respect for Turkish Cypriot political autonomy.

Sinem Arslan is a Visiting Fellow at the London School of Economics and Political Science.
Nina Caspersen is a Professor of Political Science and Associate Dean, Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of York.

The brief is published as part of the RCN-funded project "Dynamics of de facto state patron-client relations" (project number 301277).

Photo credit: Burçin Aybars

NUPI Norwegian Institute of International Affairs

Established in 1959, the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs [NUPI] is a leading independent research institute on international politics and areas of relevance to Norwegian foreign policy. Formally under the Ministry of Education and Research, NUPI nevertheless operates as an independent, non-political instance in all its professional activities. Research undertaken at NUPI ranges from shortterm applied research to more long-term basic research.

NUPI
Rosenkrantz' gate 22
0160 Oslo, Norway
post@nupi.no | nupi.no