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# Turkish Nationalism and the Cyprus Question: Change, Continuity and Implications for Engagement with Northern Cyprus

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**ABSTRACT** This article examines the change and continuity in the Turkish policy toward Cyprus since the *de facto* partition of the island in 1974. The exploration of the relationship between Turkish nationalism and foreign policy toward Cyprus suggests that the language of Turkish nationalism regarding the Cyprus question has been far from monotonous. It is shown that the period coinciding with the coming of the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) in 2002 in particular was a critical juncture which opened up the discursive space for the re-articulation of the ‘Cyprus problem’, legitimising efforts in relation to reunification. Yet the partial nature of the discursive shift and the absence of a complete paradigmatic change—explained here with reference to structural and historical features of the Cyprus problem as well as the contingent nature of the European Union (EU) membership prospects—has meant the return of the well-entrenched narratives on the conflict and national identity. Also revealing the ways in which Turkish Cypriots have responded to such changes in policy and rhetoric from Ankara, the paper aims to complement existing accounts of trans-border nationalism in conflict and post-conflict settings.

## 1. Introduction

The Cyprus problem has been an omnipresent issue of Turkish politics. As others have further noted, it is the Cyprus problem which perhaps best illustrates the overarching influence of nationalism in Turkish politics (Poulton, 1999; but see also Kuyucu, 2005). An important reference point for Turkish foreign policy toward Cyprus and the Turkish Cypriot community is nationalism—i.e. the idea that promotes identification based on shared traits, a shared sense of motherland and membership determined by a descent rule. Despite being an ever-present feature of the bilateral relations for both parties, such identification on the basis of ethnic kinship and national loyalty between Turkey and the Turkish Cypriots has been far from harmonious. On the one hand, the Turkish Cypriot

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identification with the ‘motherland’ and feelings of gratitude for its support are balanced by a growing sense of subordination, ‘of being the inferior partner in a metropolis-hinterland relationship’ (Bahcheli & Noel, 2013) evidenced in political discourse. For Turkey, it is a balance between an ever-present fear of betrayal from their ethnic kins in Cyprus and a narrative of national security.

What follows is an attempt to examine the ways in which Turkish nationalism has perceived the Cyprus problem as well as the affairs of the Turkish Cypriot community that has established itself as the governing entity in the north of the island since 1974. The specific argument in this contribution is that Turkey’s aspiration to join the EU and the significance of the Cyprus issue with respect to the accession process represented a ‘critical juncture’ in redefining the latter within the mainstream political discourse. The discursive space for the re-articulation of the Cyprus problem opened up in run up to the ‘Annan Plan Referendum’ (2004) period which, allowed the AKP to legitimise its efforts in relation to Cyprus’ reunification. As the analysis further shows however, the new context in the aftermath of the referendum witnessed the return of the well-entrenched narratives on the conflict and national identity favoured by Turkish nationalism.

Conceptually, the article follows a constructivist perspective to examine the extent to which Turkish nationalism conceives the Cyprus problem as well as the Turkish Cypriot population. The conceptual discussion includes a review of the literature on trans-border nationalism. Secondary sources are also consulted in the relevant sections investigating the evolution of Turkish nationalism. Policy documents, official statements and news reports sit at the heart of the empirical discussion and these texts are analysed qualitatively in order to provide rich empirical insights into the ways the Cyprus problem and the Turkish Cypriot community living on the island has been conceived in the Turkish political discourse. These are particularly helpful for the purposes of the investigation because the discursive construction of collective/national identity involves articulation at different levels: government, political parties as well as the print media. Data collection was restricted predominantly to the texts produced between 1995 and 2019 and the search was further focused around key chronological moments determined by the salience of the Cyprus related issues. The analysis supports the key argument of this study that nationalism—though constrained by an arguably instrumental use of EU membership—remains an important reference point for the Turkish political elite in conceiving Cyprus.

The article is organised as follows. The first part outlines the conceptual framework to situate the Turkey-Turkish Cypriot relationship within the literature on ethnic nationalism. The second part then briefly sets out the peculiarities of the bilateral relationship owing to northern Cyprus’ status as an unrecognised state. This is followed by the third part which analyses the ways in which the Cyprus problem played out in Turkish politics in the period before the coming to the office of the AKP. The fourth part then explores how the Cyprus problem and the bilateral relationship have been sustained in Turkish mainstream discourse since 2004. The article concludes by highlighting the implications of its empirical findings for research on nationalism and identity in conflict and post-conflict settings.

## **2. Trans-Border Nationalism: Understanding the Impact of Turkish Nationalism in Northern Cyprus**

While Cyprus presents an exception to the Turkish policy of ‘cautious engagement’ with national minorities (see below), it nonetheless overlaps with the key features of transborder

nationalism elaborated by others in the literature (Fitzgerald, 2005; Sherman, 1999). From this perspective, the trans-border nationalisms assert states' right and obligation to protect the interests of the national minority in other states. (Brubaker, 2004). From a constructivist perspective, a state assumes parenthood of such national minorities when the elites construe a discourse on national identity which conceives certain residents and citizens of other states as co-nationals and when they assert that this shared nationhood makes the state responsible for the well-being of the minority. For Smith (2003), this is usually pursued by the elites through a combination of 'extra-territorial' domestic and foreign policy tools in order to extend their sovereignty beyond state borders and create or maintain cross-border ties of loyalty and membership. For example, in Hungary, the ethnic Hungarians in neighbouring Romania and Slovakia have been described as a potential resource for businesses in need of labour as a selling point or have been branded as an exit option for co-ethnics facing discrimination (Iordachi, 2004; Melegh, 2003, p. 120). The interest behind the creating of diaspora politics notwithstanding (though see Waterbury, 2014 among others), such claims are asserted when the national minority in question are seen as a threatened by the assimilationist policies of the 'host state' (Gagnon, 2004; Brubaker, 2011) or indeed in the case of unrecognised states, the state they seceded from. Yet despite identification on grounds of national sameness, the relationship between the national minority and the 'metropolis' are not always characterised by harmony. Divergence is indeed likely especially when the latter pursues assimilationist policies as a means of advancing nationalist as well as non-nationalist political goals. This is usually based on the pretext that treats the national minority as insufficiently 'national' in a variety of senses (Brubaker, 2011). To remedy this defect, the parent state usually urges and often undertake action to promote the socio-cultural development, the economic well-being or the political hegemony of the national minority.

In this context, Turkey too has been engaged in developing a number of diaspora policies to maintain, cultivate and deepen relations with its emigrants and co-ethnic with an aim of creating a mobilised transnational community (Aksel, 2014; Mencunterk & Baser, 2017; Şenay, 2012). A number of institutions were set up from the early 1990s (Öge, 2019) and most recently a Presidency for Turks Abroad and Relative Communities in 2010, to engage with the 'Turks abroad' comprising of emigrants who went from the 1960s onwards for employment purposes; co-ethnics who were stranded after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and were not object to population exchanges in the early 1920s and 1930s, and other Turkic communities who have been approached by different Turkish governments after the collapse of the Soviet Union as 'relative communities' (Aksel, 2014). As a result, the broader literature has seen a large number of works that address the situation and identity conceptions of the Turkish minorities in Bulgaria (for example, Elchinova, 2005), Greece (for example, Madianou, 2005) and 'external Turks' elsewhere. Yet, what still remains under-researched is the Turkish engagement with northern Cyprus and how the unique profile of northern Cyprus as an unrecognised state mediates that engagement with the co-ethnic Turkish Cypriots there. While several important works engage with identity conceptions in the Turkish Cypriot community (Lacher & Kaymak, 2005; Ramm, 2006), and on Turkey's Cyprus policy (Kaliber, 2012; Ulug-Eryilmaz, 2014; Ulusoy, 2016), rarely these are adequately synthesised to enable reflection on micro-dispositions such as Turkish Cypriot identity constructions or macro-dispositions including parent state's (i.e. Turkey) policies. This is the research gap this article aims to fill.

It is important to note too that while others for similar cases often refer to the influence of 'patron' to emphasise the dependency that exists for the unrecognised state as a result of

international isolation (Geldenhuis, 2009; Kyris, 2015), the term ‘parent’ is preferred here to better capture the official discourses that draw mostly on nationalist conceptions of identity in line with the conceptual framework delineated above. Important instances which do point to subversive conceptualisations drawing on the notion of ‘patronage’ are nonetheless highlighted to provide insights into a nuanced context.

### 3. Historical Background

The Cyprus problem has been an important part of international politics for almost 60 years. In 1960, the Republic of Cyprus (RoC) was founded on the island under the guarantee of Turkey, Greece, and Great Britain. However, the bi-communal constitutional order broke down with the escalation of intercommunal fighting in 1963, and the resulting Turkish intervention in 1974 led to the *de facto* partition of the island between the Turkish-controlled north and the Greek-controlled south. While the Greek Cypriot community has retained the title as the legitimate government of Cyprus under the Republic of Cyprus, the Turkish Cypriots first set up their own temporary administrations (see, Dodd, 1993), and later the TRNC which is recognised only by Ankara for which the former relies heavily for diplomatic, economic and military support. Many efforts have been initiated over the years by the United Nations (UN) to settle the dispute though no definite solution has been achieved yet, and the problem remains an integral part of the domestic and international politics of the involved parties.

Turkey’s Cyprus policy has traditionally been based upon nationalistic lines, which presented the issue as a problem of ‘national cause’ and as a matter of national security. Turkish nationalism in general exhibits many of the key features highlighted in the wider literature. Using Anthony Smith’s classification of ‘territorial’ and ‘ethnic’ nationalisms, the traditional Kemalist nationalism has a strong territorial component based on its espousal of Anatolia as the territory and in its refusal to incorporate Turks or fellow Muslims from the Ottoman Empire left outside of the new state or elsewhere. Another dominant feature of Turkish nationalism is the Sunni Islam component which was integrated into the state nationalist ideology from the mid-twentieth century onwards. This was an indirect propping of the ‘Turkish-Islamic synthesis’ that would be taken up by the far-right in the following years, and in the turbulent period of 1970s in particular. Turkish-Islamic synthesis became an official state policy in the 1980s after the coup in order to eliminate the power of the left and the Kurdish nationalism in Turkey. A moderate variant of the synthesis remained in situ and became a major political force, also shaping the nationalist repertoire until the AKP era. Indeed, the Islamic movement made significant headway under the leadership of Necmettin Erbakan in the 1980s which saw the Welfare Party (*Refah Partisi*-RP), a party belonging to the National Vision (*Milli Görüş*),<sup>1</sup> transforming into a truly mass party, able to secure the majority of the seats in the December 1996 elections. Since 2011, it can be argued that Turkish-Islamic synthesis has been transformed into the ‘Islamic-Turkish synthesis’ with the Islamist-leaning AKP government. Apart from this, AKP, which can be described as the offshoot of the RP in ideology, continues the trend with a wider appeal to neo-liberalism (Coşar & Özman, 2004), globalism (Öniş, 2007), socio-cultural conservatism (Kaya, 2015) and nationalism (Saraçođlu & Demirkol, 2015). More specifically, the party has been keen on emphasising its pro-liberal stance in its support for Turkey’s EU membership and its assumption of ‘the least nationalist, the most pragmatic line’ (Uzgel, 2009, p. 379) in foreign policy-making in the past two decades. On the other hand, the party’s nationalism

is fed from the Islamist appeal to the Ottoman-Islamist past as a defining characteristic of Turkish national identity (Cinar, 2006). Al (2015) highlights two key characteristics such neo-Ottomanist discourses have: (1) the reinterpretation of Turkish nationalism that is more congruent with cultural tolerance for diversity on the basis of attachment to Islam; and (2) increasing economic and political relations with the ex-Ottoman world. With regards to the latter, the implications of the neo-Ottomanist approach toward identity in Turkish foreign policy is most visible in the 'Strategic Depth Doctrine' formulated by Ahmet Davutoglu, the former Turkish Foreign Minister and once a close ally of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. In his geopolitical vision, Davutoglu combines two geographic areas: 'The region from the Northern Caucasus in the north to Kuwait in the south' and 'the southern flank of Central Asia'. He stresses their being part of the Islamic civilisation 'provides commonality to this imagined community' (see also Murrinson, 2006). While the party's initial consensual stance on the Cyprus issue described by some as a shift away from the 'Kemalist dogma' that the Cyprus problem was solved through the Turkish military intervention in 1974 has also attracted significant attention (Buhari-Gulmez, 2012; Çelenk, 2007; Kinacioglu & Oktay, 2006; Ulug-Eryilmaz, 2014; Ulusoy, 2016), and with reference to neo-Ottomanist paradigm and the operational tool of 'firm flexibility' (Sözen, 2010) the analysis below will show nonetheless that, there has been a reverse in the tide in the direction of traditional nationalism in rhetoric regarding the Cyprus Problem and the status of northern Cyprus with important implications for relations with the Turkish Cypriots on the island.

The most striking tenet of Turkish nationalism regarding the Turkish Cypriot identity is that the latter is not considered a *sui generis* form of belonging different from that of the overarching Turkish identity. From this perspective, the nationalist rhetoric makes no ethnic or cultural distinction between a Turkish Cypriot and mainland Turks. More importantly, the expression or emphasis of the Turkish Cypriot or Cypriot identity is considered a denial of *Turkishness* and a form of national sacrilege (Bora, 2011). This is not surprising since the monolithic conception of Turkishness extolled during the Republican era has traditionally conceived the plurality of identity claims from different ethno-religious communities, plurality of Turkishness or multiple interpretations of Turkishness as a threat to the integrity of the Turkish state (Al, 2015). This understanding is also true of the official Turkish Cypriot nationalism. The 'motherland nationalism' that was construed in the early years of the Turkish War of Liberation in part as a reaction to growing Greek demands for *enosis* (unification with Greece) also refrains from differentiating a Turkish Cypriot from a Turkish national<sup>2</sup> with alternative forms of belonging usually dismissed as spurious. In this sense, the late Turkish Cypriot leader Rauf Denktaş's oft-cited formulation on identity is particularly revealing:

I am a child of Anatolia. I am a Turk in its truest sense, and my roots are in Central Asia. With my culture, my language, my history and my whole persona, I am a Turk [...] I have a state and a motherland. Such notions as 'Cypriot culture', 'Cypriot-Turk', 'Cypriot-Greek', 'common Republic' are all nonsense [...] Cypriot-Turk and Cypriot-Greek simply don't exist and neither do Cypriots [...] In fact, the only true inhabitant of Cyprus is the Cyprus donkey. (*Kıbrıs*, 2000)

Within this discourse moreover, the Turkish Cypriot community is articulated as a 'continuity' that was first established with the Ottoman conquest/invasion of 1571 (Bryant, 2004; Calotychos, 1998). In nationalist mythology, it was the 'blood' shed during the

conquest of Cyprus and during the inter-communal fighting (1963–1974 period) by the ‘martyrs’ that ultimately legitimised Turkish Cypriot presence and gave them the right to make a claim on the land (Bryant, 2004). In their rhetorical analysis of Mustafa Kemal’s Nutuk (the Speech) before the national assembly in 1927, Morin and Lee (2010) also reveal how Mustafa Kemal understood the ‘noble blood’ of Turks as sacred when spilled in defence of the country. The spilled blood creates the fatherland that includes those who showed self-sacrifice (Al, 2015). Such references to ‘land’ and the ‘blood’ of the Turkish martyrs within the Turkish nationalist mythology, conceived Cyprus as an ‘off-spring’ of the Turkish nation (Bryant, 2004; Killoran, 2000). It is this conception of the national family (with reference to the matrimony of ‘blood’ and ‘land’) that constructs the ‘statehood’ of northern Cyprus with reference to the Turkish state and the identity of Turkish Cypriots with reference to the Turkish nation (Cıraklı, 2017). In this respect, official discourses refer to the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC)<sup>3</sup> as the ‘infant-land’ or ‘baby-land’ (*yavruvatan*), in need of protection and nurturing for its survival from the ‘motherland’ Turkey in the context of a pervasive insecurity (Cıraklı, 2018).

An important outcome of the Turkish nationalist discourse for the Turkish Cypriot state-building efforts that begun with the *de facto* division of the island in 1974 was that the successive governing structures, including the TRNC has not been seen as independent, sovereign states but rather as an ‘overseas province of Turkey’ (*Hürriyet*, 2017). This is also substantiated by the crippling ostracisation of northern Cyprus as an unrecognised entity on the international fora and the heavy reliance on Turkish support as a result. Over the years, such reliance has led to growing contestation over the nature of the ties that were once considered ‘existential’. It is important to note that support exists in the Turkish Cypriot community for ever-closer links with Turkey in all spheres on the grounds of ethnic kinship and national sameness. Moreover, the nationalist discourse delineated above was championed and indeed at times shaped by the late Turkish Cypriot leader Rauf Denktaş and the party he helped set up, the National Unity Party (UBP) which dominated the administration, thus the politics of the Turkish Cypriot community for the greater part of the TRNC’s history. Denktaş also held pockets of support in the Turkish military, in the Foreign Ministry and among some Turkish politicians which he did not hesitate to utilise in shaping Turkish foreign policy toward Cyprus (Robins, 2003). For the critics of the existing Turkish Cypriot relationship with Turkey however, the problem stems from the upper hand of Turkish governments in shaping Turkish Cypriot affairs as the ‘patron’.

In economic terms, the much-needed funds from Turkey are tied to bilateral economic protocols which have included self-regulatory fiscal measures, tasks and responsibilities in the shaping of Turkish Cypriot macroeconomic policy that are often contested. In December 2012, a protocol was signed between the TRNC and Turkey which envisaged a drastic reduction in the size of the public sector but also the privatisation of key Turkish Cypriot assets including electricity, telecommunications and harbours. The opposition parties took on the protocol from the outset with some claiming that it was a mere pretext to facilitate the transfer of strategic state-owned assets to those business circles in Turkey affiliated with the ruling AKP (*HaberKıbrıs.com*, 2013). Perhaps more remarkably, the proposed measures were also articulated together with fears related to losing of Turkish Cypriot identity. In this sense, privatisation of public assets has been seen as threatening Turkish Cypriot autonomy by further consolidating Ankara’s control in its domestic affairs. To this end, a series of so-called ‘Communal Survival’ rallies were held in 2011 and 2012 to protest against the measures and tell Ankara to keep its ‘hands-off the



Turkish Cypriot community' (*HaberKıbrıs.com*, 2011). The contested nature of the bilateral relationship is also reflected in a series of diplomatic blunders that have received widespread media attention. For example, in a press conference he held in July 2010, the Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan criticised the high salary of a public bank manager, and in front of TV cameras asked the then TRNC Prime Minister İrsen Küçük how much his salary was with Küçük seeing no harm in answering the question (*Milliyet*, 2010).

For the critics, the 'infant-land' expression preferred by Turkish authorities makes this asymmetrical relationship official, a charge however that comes with counter charges of mutiny. For example, in December 1997, when the centre-left Republican Turkish Party (*Cumhuriyetçi Türk Partisi-CTP*) leader Mehmet Ali Talat said to centre-right Democrat Party (*Demokrat Parti-DP*) Member of Parliament Ahmet Kaşif in front of journalists, 'Turkey may be your motherland. No matter what anybody else says my motherland is Cyprus, where I was born and grew up. Turkey may be some Cypriots' ancestors' land but it cannot be their motherland' (*Zaman*, 1997). Talat's remarks were criticised heavily by the Turkish Cypriot leader Rauf Denktaş and was brought under limelight again in the presidential race in 2010 by his rival Derviş Eroğlu (*Turktime*, 2010).

#### **4. Turkey's Cyprus Policy (1974–2004)**

Cyprus was conquered by the Ottoman Empire in 1570–1571 and was ruled by it until 1878 when its administration was temporarily granted to Britain in return for a promise of protection against Russia. With the outbreak of the First World War, the island was annexed by the British and it was declared a Crown Colony in 1925. With the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923 moreover, Turkey renounced its sovereign rights over Cyprus and in effect gave up all its claims on the island. As Uzer (2010, p. 109) further points out, Cyprus was 'neither mentioned in the founding documents of the republic, such as the National Pact and the Treaty of Lausanne, nor did it appear in the official statements of the political leaders'.

Indeed, it was only with the second half of the twentieth century that Cyprus entered the nationalist agendas which had been dominated by the fate of other minorities in the Balkans, Caucasus, Central Asia, Mosul and Kirkuk. Following the outbreak of inter-communal clashes in the 1950s, first the radical wing, then the mainstream nationalist circles gradually became more involved in the matter. Together with the Turkish Cypriot nationalists, the nationalist circles in Turkey began to mobilise under the slogans '*Kıbrıs Türktür, Türk Kalacaktır* (Cyprus is Turkish, it will remain Turkish)' espousing the ownership of the whole of the island, and later the irredentist claim of '*Ya Taksim Ya Ölüm* (Secession or Death)'. As İsmail Tansu, a TMT officer<sup>4</sup> from the Special War Department (or *Özel Harp Dairesi*) recalled:

The decision to establish a joint Turkish Cypriot-Greek Cypriot Republic in Cyprus did not slow us down. No matter the direction of Turkey's Cyprus policy, our unswerving goal was to save the island, which we made a part of the Turkish nation by flying our flag for 340 years; In the case that conditions were not ripe for this, then at least we were going to establish Turkish control in one half of the Island, and ensure that a free and independent Turkish state would be established on Turkish Cypriot land. (Tansu, 2001)



From then onwards, Cyprus became the focus of Turkish nationalism, taking the pride of place in references to *Turkishness* and national security. Among others, Cyprus is attached a special importance on three premises: (1) Besides Hatay (an ex-province of Syria, which was annexed by Turkey in 1939), Cyprus signifies the most recent military victory which resulted in the acquisition of territory (2) Cyprus represents a model with regards to ‘tying’ the Turks and Muslims living in the Turkic states in Caucasia and Central Asia, and the areas heavily populated by Turks and/or Muslims in the Balkans; (3) Cyprus’ geostrategic position with regards to the southern coast of Turkey. The latter in particular is the issue most frequently raised by Turkish nationalism echoed also by the leader of the Democratic Left Party (*Demokratik Sol Parti*-DSP), Bülent Ecevit, who led the 1974 intervention as the Prime Minister of Turkey. As Ecevit explained in a speech in 1997: ‘Anyone who takes a look at the map [...] will see how crucial Cyprus is [for Turkey]. The security of our southern shores, ports and future pipelines depends on our military presence in the “TRNC” (TBMM, 1997).’

It is important to note however that the nationalist tide over Cyprus which begun in the 1950s and peaked in the 1970s receded temporarily in the aftermath of the 1974 intervention. The main reason for this appears to be the overall perception which saw the *de facto* partition of the island as the realisation of the Turkish policy of *taksim* (secession). Nonetheless, the proclamation of the new Turkish Cypriot state in 1983, and subsequent developments which took place in the following decade would lead to heated debates over Cyprus and indeed hardening of the Turkish positions. Among others, these developments can be summarised as follows: (1) Widespread condemnation over the self-proclamation of the TRNC reflected in the UN Security Council Resolutions 541 and 550; (2) rejection of Turkey’s membership application to the European Communities (EC) in 1987; (3) the end of the Cold War revitalising the debates over the ‘Great Turkish World’; (4) the European Court of Justice (ECJ) decision in 1994 to introduce restrictions on Turkish Cypriot goods; (5) rapid deterioration of the relations between Turkey and Greece, and the heightened tensions in the context of 1995 Imia/Kardak Crisis; (6) border clashes in Cyprus in the UN Buffer zone in 1996; (7) the S-300 Missile Crisis which broke out among Turkey, Greece and the RoC; (8) the start of full membership talks between EU and the RoC in 1998; and last but not least (9) the capturing in 1999 of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (*Partiya Karkerêren Kurdistan*-PKK) leader Abdullah Öcalan who was sheltered by Greek Embassy in Nairobi.<sup>5</sup>

In line with such developments, Turkish positions hardened and an ‘irredentist’ rhetoric on the basis of further ‘integration’ of the TRNC with the Turkish mainland was frequently articulated throughout the 1990s. In June 1994, Bülent Ecevit suggested that the TRNC should integrate with Turkey for matters of defence and foreign policy while retaining autonomy for domestic matters. The Turkish Foreign Ministry and the Turkish Ministry of National Defence also stated that: ‘South Cyprus has moved to integrate with Greece. Naturally, the Turkish Cypriots wish to establish similar cooperation and integration with Turkey’ (Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1995). The Turkish Prime Minister Tansu Çiller and President Süleyman Demirel also continued the policy of ‘integration’ though rather tentatively in the face of objections from the EU (European Parliament, 1996). The EU’s ‘1997 Luxembourg summit in December 1997 nonetheless saw a particularly strong reaction by signing a partial integration agreement when Turkey was left off the list of candidates for full membership (*Hürriyet*, 1997).

While Ankara reverted to a more cautious role following the Helsinki Summit in 1999 which saw Turkey's EU candidacy secured, Turkish Prime Minister Ecevit continued supporting Denktaş' reluctance in Cyprus and his precondition to restart the talks only upon the recognition of TRNC's sovereignty by insisting that 'the fact that there are two completely independent states on the island should be recognised'. At the turn of the century and Cyprus' preparations to join the EU in full swing, Ecevit maintained his nationalist stance that if the EU would admit a divided Cyprus, then Turkey would either annex the TRNC or establish a 'special relationship with it' making it an autonomous part of Turkey (Ecevit cited in Hale, 2008).

## 5. AKP Policy Toward Cyprus

It was during the AKP era that the official discourses on Cyprus have gone under the most profound change. Having won the election of 3 November 2002, and with the increased prospects for EU membership for Turkey, the AKP government tackled the dominant state policy vis-à-vis the Cyprus problem head on. As Oran (2010:, p. 927) has described, 'the previous position of "no solution is the solution" was being abandoned [...] this meant giving up the idea of a confederation [championed by the Turkish side thus far] and returning to the formula based on federation'. As Oran further notes, the AKP's radical shift on foreign policy toward Cyprus during this time was tied to its own EU-related aspirations and on the basis that a settlement would clear Turkey's path toward membership, a prospect that would further reinforce AKP's legitimacy (Oran, 2010). Perhaps more remarkably, its absolute majority in the Turkish Parliament indicated that the AKP was in a position to undertake such radical policy changes on 'national issues' like Cyprus. As such, this was the first time that Rauf Denktaş who had been a staunch advocate of a two-state solution came under heavy criticism by a Turkish government. The immediate aftermath of the EU's Copenhagen Summit in 2002 was marked by increasing pressure by the AKP government on Denktaş to negotiate and sign the UN-brokered Annan Plan until Cyprus' EU accession set for 1 May 2004.<sup>6</sup> The Turkish Foreign Minister Yaşar Yakış even stated that if a settlement in Cyprus based on the Annan Plan were not achieved by 28 February, since the Greek Cypriots would by then be EU members representing the entire island, the Turkish military on the island would in fact be occupying part of the EU territory (*Hürriyet*, 2002).

As the then Prime Minister Erdoğan argued: 'I am not in favour of maintaining the policies that have been place in the past 30–40 years [...] This is not about Denktaş [...]. You cannot push the voter's will aside [...]' (NTV, 2003). Erdoğan's statements were perceived as open support to the opposition on the island. Erdoğan's 24 January 2004 remarks during the World Economic Forum in Davos were the cause of another round of crisis within Turkish political circles and signalled that he would increase the pressure on Denktaş for any kind of solution. Erdoğan expressed that an agreement based on the Annan Plan would be possible if Rauf Denktaş and the Greek Cypriot leader Glafkos Clerides sincerely wanted a solution. Kofi Annan presented the third version of the Plan to the parties on 26 February 2003. During a press conference with Annan, Erdoğan maintained that 'We are now closer to a deal than ever. The revised Plan appears to closely reflect the facts on the island and is a genuine attempt to alleviate the concerns of both sides as much as possible' (*Milliyet*, 2003). Erdoğan took the initiative to accept Annan's preconditions in February 2004 for the resumption of negotiations. These preconditions included Annan's

‘filling in the blanks’ regarding the unsettled matters and the submission of the final plan to simultaneous referenda.

It is important to note nonetheless that AKP’s radical shift in policy did not go unchallenged. Indeed, in parallel to the development above, nationalist circles in Turkey intensified their efforts to get organised or to make its existing activities more effective in Cyprus so as to prevent an agreement on the basis of a federation. Especially during the 2002–2004 period, when the Annan Plan was on the agenda reference was continuously made to Cyprus’ strategic importance for Turkey. For example, at a rally in Istanbul on 2 February 2003, which was held by certain sections drawing from the CHP (*Cumhuriyetçi Halk Partisi*, Republican Turkish Party) but also the MHP (*Milliyetçi Halk Partisi*, Nationalist People’s Party) who were against the Annan Plan to voice their support for Denktaş, there were chants like ‘Turkey’s defence starts from Cyprus’ and the speakers gave messages to the same effect. In this respect, the Former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Şükrü Sina Gürel described Cyprus as Turkey’s ‘front line of defence’ asserting that the island was not just an ordinary territory but ‘land which belongs to the Turkish nation’ (*Radikal*, 2003).

On the other hand, Denktaş’ continued intransigence to seriously negotiate the Plan also faced strong domestic opposition. Ultimately the pro-EU actors in favour of reunification, led by leftist Mehmet Ali Talat were able to gradually remove the hardliners from office in the parliamentary elections in December 2003 (and later in presidential elections in April 2005). The results of the two referenda held in Cyprus on 24 April 2004 were as follows: while the Annan Plan was accepted in the north by 64.9% of the Turkish Cypriots, it was rejected in the south by 75.8% of the Greek Cypriots.

Almost immediately after the Plan was rejected by the Greek Cypriots however, there was a clear return to a nationalist rhetoric that had been articulated in Turkish official discourses regarding the Cyprus problem. As Turkish President Abdullah Gül asserted: ‘Cyprus problem is a matter of honour for Turkish foreign policy and we will not sacrifice our cause for other interests’ (*Haber7*, 2005). In this vein, the government declared that Turkey would not recognise the RoC until a settlement was reached (Turkish MFA, 2005).

Moreover, in 2006 the Turkish government announced a ‘Cyprus Action Plan’ which aimed to end the isolation of northern Cyprus in exchange for opening of the ports to Greek Cypriot ships and vessels and to resume the negotiations under UN supervision (Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2006). While the Action Plan failed to bring about any concrete results, the nationalist trend continued when the talks were resumed in late 2008, exemplified in Prime Minister Erdoğan’s visit to the TRNC for the 34th anniversary of Turkey’s intervention on 18 July 2008. While Erdoğan gave a reminder that Turkey was in favour of the Annan Plan, accusing the Greek Cypriots of torpedoing the initiative, he nonetheless reiterated Turkey’s traditional Cyprus policy based on ‘a solution between equal statuses of two sovereign states’ (*Hürriyet*, 2008). In 2009, the Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutođlu underlined that the negotiations with the EU would be frozen when the Greek Cypriots took over the EU’s term presidency, which was scheduled for the second half of 2012 (*Radikal*, 2009). In 2011, Erdoğan claimed Turkey had given enough concessions in Cyprus and that circumstances had changed. He stated that ‘there won’t be any more concessions in Cyprus’ (*Zaman*, 2011). Turkey’s turn to traditional policies became apparent when Erdoğan in 2012 during a visit to Germany stated ‘there is no state called “Cyprus”, for us there is a Greek Cypriot side and the TRNC (*Kıbrıs Postası*, 2012)’.

Subsequently, and in the context of the growing strategic importance of the island with regards to the 'East–West energy corridor', energy begun occupying a more noteworthy place in Turkey's Cyprus policy (see also Kaliber, 2012). For example, in September 2011, the Greek Cypriots initiated exploratory drilling for natural gas and oil in the Mediterranean with the partnership of an American-Israeli firm. Turkey reacted by signing the Continental Shelf Limitation Agreement with Turkish Cypriots and sent the Turkish vessel *Piri Reis* to carry out research in the region. On the signing of the agreement, Erdoğan described the offshore drilling by Cyprus and Israel as 'irresponsible and provocative'. As he further put it: 'We had previously brought to the international community's attention in a clear manner [...] that if the Greek Cypriots started drilling, we would take a number of concrete steps together with the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus' (*Cumhuriyet*, 2011).

The return of the well-known narratives regarding the Cyprus Problem also has implications for the narratives regarding the status of the Turkish Cypriots living on the island. An important Turkish encounter in this sense with the Turkish Cypriot community took place in the context of the Turkish-proposed economic programme titled 'Programme for Increasing the Effectiveness of the Public Sector and the Competitiveness of the Private Sector (2010–2012)'. As the aims of this programme were to boost the private sector and reduce budget deficits, to increase the revenues of the state by intensifying privatisation and reducing the number of civil servants (Bozkurt, 2014), it drew reactions of the Turkish Cypriots. Following the protests, Erdoğan claimed that the Turkish Cypriot authorities do more to tackle criticism levied against Turkey. On Turkey's Cyprus policy and relations with the Turkish Cypriots, Erdoğan asserted: '[...] We have martyrs, we have veterans, we have strategic interests [...] We keep supporting [Turkish Cypriots]. Should we not expect anything in return [*karşılık*]?' (*Milliyet*, 2011).

The election of Mustafa Akıncı as the Turkish Cypriot president in 2015 placed the issue under the limelight once again. Akıncı's criticism from the onset on the terms of the relationship with Ankara and his request for a relationship 'among equal siblings' was met by criticism from the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan suggesting that Akıncı should pay more attention to what he was asking. Erdoğan warned Akıncı that transition from 'mother-infant' relationship would come at a cost as Turkey sacrificed 500 martyrs and 1 billion dollars in aid, thus not deserving such rhetoric (*Milliyet*, 2015). In a later conversation, when Erdoğan said 'mothers do not wish to give up on their motherhood', Akıncı responded by saying that 'all children would like to grow up' (*Milliyet*, 2015).

On the whole, the narrative above manifests that the official Turkish positions on Cyprus displayed a particular openness in run up to the 'Annan Plan' (2002–2004) period and this critical juncture allowed the AKP to legitimise its efforts in relation to Cyprus' reunification. As described above however, the partial nature of this discursive shift and the absence of a complete paradigm shift in terms of the continuities over how Cyprus issue was presented by the AKP government, can be explained by the structural and historical features of the Cyprus problem (particularly its linkage to identity and national security) as well as the contingent nature of the 'window of opportunity' represented by EU membership that was made available. Indeed, the status of the Cyprus problem following the Annan Plan referendum has led to a change in the AKP's rhetoric along more nationalistic lines.

The general mood in Turkey seems to be that the AKP government had played its part in supporting reunification on a federal basis as the majority of the Turkish Cypriots had wished. After the 2004 referendum, the dominant rhetoric appears to be that it is now up

to the EU to end the community's ostracisation and put pressure on the Greek Cypriots to return to the negotiating table. But following the accession of Cyprus into the EU in May 2004, the EU appears from a Turkish perspective to be unable to act impartially and fulfil its initial promises. More remarkably perhaps, the choice since then has been presented along nationalist lines that ultimately Turkey would need to decide whether to pursue EU membership at the cost of losing Cyprus and indeed succumb to Greek Cypriot demands envisaging the integration the Turkish Cypriots as a minority group into the Republic of Cyprus.

To make the matters more complicated, a Turkish presence in Cyprus is occupying a more noteworthy place in regional leadership calculations but also in the context of recent gas discoveries off the coast of Cyprus. In the light of the Trans-Adriatic pipeline and the East–West energy corridor, Turkey is highly likely to aim to prevent any unilateral advantage by Greek Cypriots in the Eastern Mediterranean without the Cyprus issue being resolved. More remarkably perhaps, Turkish rhetoric regarding its drilling activities in the region is premised upon the nationalist narrative drawing on 'security' and 'kinship' delineated earlier. As the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan asserted recently together with a pledge to protect the rights and interests of Turkish Cypriots: 'Those who dream of changing the fact that Turkish Cypriots are an integral part of the Turkish nation will realize it is in vain' (Sabah, 2019).

## 6. Conclusion

Turkish nationalism's interest in Cyprus has been ever-present since the 1950s though with variation in content and in intensity. This interest mainly stems from Cyprus being seen as a strategic 'frontier' vital for Turkey's security, and an important reference point for *Turkishness* which has come to the fore in the last few years as part of the AKP government's reappraisal of Islam and the Turkish national identity. In addition, recent developments in the Eastern Mediterranean and the wider Middle East in general has resulted in greater interest especially in the context of gas discoveries and the upgrading of relations between the RoC, Israel, Egypt and Greece in the region. The investigation offered here was able to establish a rather temporal and instrumental effect of the EU perspective on Turkey's Cyprus policy which began to decrease following the abortion of reunification while the subsequent developments have forced Turkish nationalism to once again assert itself in a manner that is considerably closer to the nationalist 'parent state', emphasising a 'security first' policy based on the two-state, confederal solution long-espoused by the former Turkish Cypriot leader Denktaş. Moreover, the analysis above also shows that while Turkish nationalism seems to be getting prepared to protect the rights of its co-nationals from the *yavruvatan*—with a more explicit assertion that the latter need to be drawn closer into Turkey's orbit—loyalty on the island toward Turkish nationalism is increasingly challenged on the grounds of a distinct Turkish Cypriot identity and a growing sense of statehood.<sup>7</sup>

Indeed, for Turkish Cypriots, the Cyprus conflict has structured the specific discursive context to conceive bilateral relations with Turkey in a non-uniform and sometimes in a conflicting manner. The fluctuating prospects for reunification since the 2004 referendum has led to a growing insecurity and widespread anxieties in relation to maintaining their identity and the viability of their self-rule. In this sense, it would not be far to suggest that such anxieties are only set to intensify in the absence of a resolution with significant and potentially polarising implications for the bilateral relations with Ankara.

These findings and the conceptual framework they draw from are also important for understanding nationalism both in and beyond traditional contexts. Indeed, the ‘parent’ or ‘patron’ plays a key role in other cases of trans-border nationalism but also in unrecognised states, such as Transnistria or in South Ossetia and Abkhazia which enjoy significant Russian support. Abkhazia is also interesting as far as the ethnic identification and relationship with the patron state is concerned: though mostly Russian citizens and reliant heavily on Russian help, the Abkhaz remain very sensitive to any possibility of becoming a minority or their homeland becoming a province of Russia (*The Guardian*, 2016). By extension, other examples of kin-states whereby assertive parent states—such as Hungary and its citizenship policies toward Hungarian minorities—have been contributing to increased anxieties over identity are increasingly scrutinised within a burgeoning literature. The relations between Romania and Moldova and the changing nature of identification is another particularly revealing example from the post-Soviet space (Ticu, 2016).

This investigation thus has increased relevance to a number of other cases, where research can benefit from the synthesised approach offered here to enable reflection on micro-dispositions such as Turkish Cypriot identity constructions as well as macro-dispositions including parent state’s (i.e. Turkey) policies. Further research is indeed needed to question whether and to what extent parent state policies are compatible with individual and group perceptions of identity, tensions between official emphases on kinship and popular pressures ‘from below’ based on other, subversive loyalties. and implications of such instances for transnational practices and bilateral relations in traditional settings and beyond.

## Notes

1. The National Vision Movement is a political movement founded by Necmettin Erbakan, who was the leader of the National Order Party (*Millî Nizam Partisi*-MNP), National Salvation Party (*Millî Selamet Partisi*-MSP) and Welfare Party (*Refah Partisi*-RP), and the Prime Minister of the Welfare Party-True Path Party coalition between July 1996 and June 1997. Its objective is to replace Turkey’s underdeveloped status compared to the West with economic and spiritual development. The reference point of spiritual development is Islam (Çakır, 2002; Yavuz, 2002).
2. Denktaş never strayed from this line of thought. Derviş Eroğlu who served as the ‘President’ of the ‘TRNC’ from 2010 until 2015 when he was replaced by Mustafa Akıncı, also follows the same line of thought, claiming that he is a ‘Turk from Kayseri’ in his visits to Turkey (*Turktime*, 2010). In Turkish politics, Alparslan Türkeş, the founder of the far-right MHP is perhaps the striking example regarding the issue. Born in Cyprus as Hüseyin Feyzullah, Türkeş refrained from saying that he was a Cypriot, instead identifying himself as ‘from Kayseri’ and a descendant of Afşar Turks (see Bora & Gültekingil, 2002, pp. 116–117). What all three leaders share in common seems to be an attempt to emphasise their Turkishness as opposed to a hyphenated version of belonging that is often seen in nationalist imaginary as a deviation.
3. In May 1983 Denktaş broke off all intercommunal talks, and in November he proclaimed the ‘TRNC’. Whilst Turkey announced immediately that it recognised the broke-away republic, the UN Security Council condemned the move and repeated its demand, first made in 1974, that all foreign troops be withdrawn. The subsequent UN efforts to resume talks in 1984 and 1985 were unsuccessful, and in May 1985 a constitution for the ‘TRNC’ was approved in a referendum.
4. Turkish Resistance Movement (*Türk Mukavemet Teşkilatı* or the TMT), was a Turkish Cypriot paramilitary group set up to avert possible Greek Cypriot attacks and to eliminate the ‘traitors’ within the Turkish community. As An describes:

in its first proclamation, on November 2, 1974, TMT gave the first command to the Turkish-Cypriots concerning total obedience to the orders of the organisation and announced the



following: in this struggle there may be—though we do not wish to believe such a thing—traitors. In such a case their extermination will be unavoidable. (Cited in Yennaris, 2003, p. 125)

5. For a more detailed analysis of such developments and the reactions triggered by them from the successive Turkish governments, see Uzer (2010).
6. On 11 November 2002, the then United Nations (UN) Secretary General Kofi Annan proposed a comprehensive plan towards settling the diplomatic dispute to allow the EU accession of a reunified Cyprus. Following extensive negotiations, the fifth version of the so-called ‘Annan Plan’ was submitted to simultaneous referenda on 24 April 2004, the results of which are well-known: 65% of Turkish-Cypriot voters accepted the Plan while 76% of Greek-Cypriot voters casted ‘no’.
7. This is an intriguing finding of significant comparative value for research beyond Cyprus in further discerning the implications of kinship for nation-building processes in conflict and post-conflict settings and will be addressed at length in a different study.

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