

# AZERBAIJAN'S RECOGNITION AND NORMALIZATION OF NORTHERN CYPRUS

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In recent years, Azerbaijan's foreign policy towards the unrecognized statelet of Turkish Cyprus, known as the "Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus" (TRNC), has emerged as a potential model for the gradual recognition and international socialization of non-recognized states. Following its victory in the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War, Azerbaijan has conspicuously shifted its foreign-political stance regarding certain de facto entities, with a particular emphasis on the TRNC. Following Turkey's military invasion and occupation of approximately 36 percent of the Republic of Cyprus in 1974, the TRNC declared the independence of the occupied territories in 1983, receiving recognition exclusively from Turkey. Recognition of the TRNC by Bangladesh and Pakistan in 1983 were subsequently withdrawn due to pressure from the United States and the international community.

This research brief aims to demonstrate how Azerbaijan's evolving policy is set to facilitate the international recognition of the TRNC, positioning itself, alongside traditional advocate Turkey, as a principal socializer of the TRNC. This effort comes despite significant international sanctions, as stipulated in various UN Security Council resolutions, regarding the illegality of the TRNC, which distinguish the territory from other de facto states. Azerbaijan's current policy evolution is believed to be a result of geopolitical bargaining with Turkey, its regional ally, as outlined in the Shusha Declaration of 2021, which enshrines the parameters of their politico-military alliance, emphasizing that both parties regard each other as equals with equal burden-sharing commitments.

More broadly, Azerbaijan's alignment with Russia, Turkey, and to a certain degree Iran, as well as its intense integration with likeminded Central Asian regimes, underscores its commitment to fostering an alternative international and regional order that contrasts with Western liberal democratic norms and values. Azerbaijan's efforts to promote the international recognition of the TRNC thus contrast with the Western approach to resolving the Cyprus issue and run counter to UN Security Council resolutions. This contributes to the widening civilizational rift between the West and a rising non-Western bloc, which advocates for illiberal models of development and a multipolar international system.

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1. US Congress. 1983. H.Con.Res.220 – "A concurrent resolution condemning the action of the so-called "Turkish Federated State of Cyprus" in declaring itself to be an independent state on Cyprus on November 15, 1983."

2. "Azerbaijan publishes full text of Shusha Declaration on Allied Relations". *Trend News Agency* 16 June, 2021. [Online] <https://en.trend.az/azerbaijan/politics/3440715.html> (Accessed on 01/06/2024).

## THE INTERNATIONAL LEGAL STATUS OF NORTHERN CYPRUS

In contrast to other de facto states, the TRNC faced significant and resolute international opposition. For instance, four UN Security Council resolutions (S/RES/822, S/RES/853, S/RES/874, S/RES/884) around the Nagorno-Karabakh/Artsakh Republic, another de facto state, called upon “local Armenian forces” to withdraw from the territories *outside* the Nagorno-Karabakh region.<sup>3</sup> Compared to the case with TRNC-related resolutions, which unequivocally designated Turkey as a state that militarily occupied the territory of another sovereign state, Armenia was not mentioned in that capacity in the given Nagorno-Karabakh related resolutions altogether. In fact, the UN Security Council “urge[d] the government of the Republic of Armenia to continue to exert its influence to achieve compliance by the Armenians of the Nagorno-Karabakh [Autonomous Oblast of former Soviet Azerbaijan]” and to accept the proposals of the Minsk Group of the CSCE.<sup>4</sup>

In comparison, the UN Security Council adopted three resolutions (S/RES/541(1983), S/RES/544(1983), S/RES/550(1984) with much stricter restrictions regarding the TRNC’s international legality. These resolutions urged “all states not to recognize”<sup>5</sup> the TRNC and “not to facilitate or in any way assist” it, declaring its creation “legally invalid.”<sup>6</sup> These resolutions precipitated the TRNC’s complete isolation and the imposition of multifaceted embargoes by the international community, with Turkey being the sole exception.

In contrast, the self-proclaimed Artsakh Republic, despite facing UN resolutions, did not experience the same level of isolation as the TRNC. By 2023, before its complete annexation by Azerbaijan, the de facto Artsakh Republic enjoyed full-fledged support from Armenia, similar to the support TRNC received from Turkey. However, unlike Turkey, Armenia never officially recognized the sovereignty of Artsakh. Despite a lack of recognition, the Artsakh Republic regularly received annual financial assistance from the United States, provided through Armenia — an advantage not shared by Turkish Cypriot. Moreover, compared to the TRNC, OSCE Minsk Group Co-chairs from the United States, Russia, and France regularly visited Artsakh. These gestures highlighted the international mediatory body’s acknowledgment of the Armenian de facto state as a party to the conflict with Azerbaijan, which was not the case with the TRNC.

## BACKGROUND

Azerbaijan’s engagement with the de facto Turkish state in Cyprus extends to the early 1990s. In 1992, the Supreme Assembly of the Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic of Azerbaijan, chaired by Heydar Aliyev, who would later become the president of Azerbaijan, recognized the TRNC as a sovereign state. This recognition occurred despite the fact that Nakhichevan’s legislative body lacked foreign policy authority. It is believed that Heydar Aliyev’s move aimed to appease Turkey and secure its neutrality in his political confrontation with then President Abulfaz Elchibey, his overtly pro-Turkish political opponent. Later on, years after Heydar Aliyev ascended to power in Azerbaijan, unofficial diplomatic representative offices were exchanged with the TRNC in 1996-97. This was followed by the establishment of various cultural and economic organizations in the Turkish-occupied part of Cyprus, such as the Azerbaijani Cultural Center and the Azerbaijan-North Cyprus Youth Union.

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3. UN SC 1993. Resolution 822 (S/RES/822) - Armenia-Azerbaijan. [Online] <http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/doc/822> (Accessed on 11/06/2024).

4. UN SC 1993. Resolution 853 (S/RES/853) - Armenia-Azerbaijan. [Online] <http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/doc/853> (Accessed on 11/06/2024).

5. UN SC 1983. Resolution 541 (S/RES/541) - on Declaration by the Turkish Cypriot Community of its Secession from Cyprus. [Online] <https://documents.un.org/api/symbol/access?j=NR045399&t=pdf> (Accessed on 11/06/2024).

6. UN SC 1984. Resolution 550 (S/RES/550) – on Secessionist actions in Cyprus. [Online] <https://documents.un.org/api/symbol/access?j=NR048780&t=pdf> (Accessed on 11/06/2024).

Azerbaijan's role in the political processes surrounding the TRNC began to increase noticeably from 2003, coinciding with the implementation of the Annan Plan — named after the then United Nations (UN) Secretary General Kofi Annan. This plan, designed under the auspices of the UN, aimed to resolve the Cyprus dispute through the reunification of the divided island into a federation of two political entities, forming the so-called United Republic of Cyprus. In 2004, on the eve of the referendum on the Annan Plan, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev announced that if the Greek Cypriot community rejected the unification project, Baku might consider officially recognizing the independence of the TRNC. According to a former TRNC diplomat who spoke to ISA under the condition of anonymity, Aliyev's involvement was intended to put additional pressure on the Greek Cypriots to agree to the Annan Plan. Turkey also threatened to annex Northern Cyprus in the event of the referendum's failure.

Ultimately, neither recognition by Azerbaijan nor annexation by Turkey occurred despite Greek Cypriot rejection of the Annan Plan. Baku's aggressive, yet cautious, approach towards advancing the recognition of Northern Cyprus was summed up by a former TRNC diplomat to ISA: The Azerbaijani authorities were probably concerned that openly promoting TRNC recognition and socialization could prompt the Republic of Cyprus to retaliate by recognizing or socializing the unrecognized Artsakh Republic.

Nevertheless, during this period, Azerbaijan managed to pursue a dual approach towards different de facto states across international platforms. For instance, in 2004, Azerbaijan supported the TRNC in obtaining observer status at the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), also subsequently endorsing TRNC's observer status aspirations at Economic Cooperation Organization, obtained in 2012. However, from 2008 onwards, Azerbaijan reportedly opposed initiatives by Saudi Arabia and Turkey to recognize and grant membership to Kosovo within the OIC.<sup>7</sup>

## **AZERBAIJAN'S DE-FACTO RECOGNITION OF NORTHERN CYPRUS**

Following its partial takeover of Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020, Azerbaijan modified its approach towards the TRNC. Recognizing the diminishing prospects of the self-proclaimed Artsakh Republic, Aliyev's government intensified its policy of gradual recognition of the TRNC. It is important to note that Azerbaijan's 2020 military campaign not only significantly reduced the territory of the still Armenian-populated Nagorno-Karabakh but also induced the Armenian government to renounce its politico-military patronage of Artsakh. Hence, the precarious situation of the Armenian de facto state in Nagorno-Karabakh became an important prerequisite for the evolution of Azerbaijan's diplomacy around the TRNC.

The process of gradual recognition of the TRNC by Azerbaijan commenced with the first-ever official phone conversation between Presidents Ilham Aliyev of Azerbaijan and Ersin Tatar of Turkish Cyprus, which was leaked by the TRNC government on 19 November 2020. During the call, Tatar congratulated Azerbaijan on its victory in Nagorno-Karabakh, while Aliyev, in turn, congratulated Tatar on his election as the “new president” of the TRNC and assured him of Azerbaijan's intention to begin the process of official recognition.<sup>8</sup>

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7. “Арабские СМИ: «Азербайджан провалил признание Косово в ОИК»”. *INews.Az* 25 May 2009. [Online] <https://1news.az/news/20090525102549613-Arabskie-SMI-Azerbaidzhan-provalil-priznanie-Kosovo-v-OIK> (Accessed on 13/06/2024).

8. “Aliyev: ‘Azerbaycan'ın KKTC'yi resmen tanınması için bizim neler yapabileceğimizi konuştuk’”, *GÜNDEM KIBRIS*, 19 November 2020. [Online] <https://www.gundemkibris.com/aliyev-azerbaycanin-kktcyi-resmen-tanimasi-icin-bizim-neler-yapabilecegimizi-konustuk> (Accessed on 12/06/2024).

Following the call, the Prime Minister of Northern Cyprus, Faiz Sucuoglu, publicly spoke on Turkish media, highlighting the TRNC's expectations that Azerbaijan, "with whom we come from the same roots, speak the same language, and share the same religion," would soon recognize Turkish Cypriot statehood.<sup>9</sup> Bilateral ties were further solidified by the first-ever official meeting between Aliyev and Tatar in Konya, Turkey, in August 2022. This meeting was officially acknowledged on the Azerbaijani president's website, referencing the status of the Turkish Cypriot state's de facto leader as "president."<sup>10</sup>

From September 19-21, 2023, following a nearly 10-month blockade against Nagorno-Karabakh, Azerbaijan launched a military operation plausibly sanctioned by Russia. This operation culminated not only in the official disbanding of the unrecognized Artsakh Republic by its de facto leadership but also caused the violent mass exodus of the region's entire indigenous population. The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe noted that there is "reasonable suspicion that this [Baku's armed takeover of Nagorno-Karabakh] amounted to ethnic cleansing," which contributed to Azerbaijan's exclusion from the Council of Europe in early 2024.<sup>11</sup>

Amid these events — and Azerbaijan's tattered international reputation — the president of the TRNC visited Baku on October 13-14, 2023, and met with Aliyev. This visit was hailed by officials as a "historic event" and a "foundational block for state-to-state relationships."<sup>12</sup> During the official meeting, Tatar, enthusiastically applauded his Azerbaijani counterpart's military operation and expressed gratitude for local events organized around "Days of Culture of Northern Cyprus." Additionally, as the website of the president of Azerbaijan reported, both sides "expressed satisfaction with the expansion of relations based on historical bonds among the peoples of the Turkic world, and the existence of opportunities for enhancing" multidimensional ties.<sup>13</sup>

Interestingly, this meeting became a catalyst for the establishment of institutionalized interaction between various state institutions. Specifically, the Azerbaijan-TRNC Parliamentary Relations Working Group was announced on April 5, 2024, with Cavansir Feyziyev, former chair of the EU-Azerbaijan parliamentary cooperation committee, elected as its chairperson. Sahiba Gafarova, Speaker of the Milli Majlis (National Assembly) of Azerbaijan, described the establishment of this Parliamentary Relations Working Group as a "historic decision" and "a step toward the diplomatic recognition process of the TRNC," emphasizing the intensification of inter-parliamentary ties.<sup>14</sup>

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9. "Northern Cyprus expects to be officially recognized by Azerbaijan: Premier", *Anadolu Agency*, 14 January 2022. [Online] <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/world/northern-cyprus-expects-to-be-officially-recognized-by-azerbaijan-premier/2473550> (Accessed on 12/06/2024).

10. President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2022. "İlham Əliyev Konyada Şimali Kipr Türk Respublikasının Prezidentini qəbul edib". [Online] <https://president.az/az/articles/view/56877> (Accessed on 13/06/2024).

11. PACE, Resolution 2517 (2023), "*The humanitarian situation in Nagorno-Karabakh*". [Online] <https://pace.coe.int/en/files/33145/html> (Accessed on 21/05/2024).

12. "Представитель ТРСК в Азербайджане Уфук Турганер в передаче «Официальные лица»", BAKU TV, 10 January, 2024 [Online] [https://youtu.be/klItV2HA7hc?si=yauSk\\_wM5iHhhfPe](https://youtu.be/klItV2HA7hc?si=yauSk_wM5iHhhfPe) (Accessed on 10/06/2024).

13. President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2023. "İlham Aliyev received President of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus Ersin Tatar". [Online] <https://president.az/en/articles/view/61573> (Accessed on 10/06/2024).

14. Milli Majlis, 2024. "Speaker of Milli Majlis Sahiba Gafarova Talks to Participants of First Meeting of Heads of External Relations Committees of Turkic States' Parliaments". [Online] <https://meclis.gov.az/news.php?id=1897&lang=en> (Accessed on 01/06/2024).

This development coincided with the decision of Northern Cyprus and Azerbaijan to upgrade their respective representative offices to diplomatic missions. Feyziyev, the chairperson of the Working Group, confidently underscored that “this situation will later be reflected in inter-state relations and create relationships regulated by international law between our republics.”<sup>15</sup>

In the context of the recognition process, it is important to highlight that both Azerbaijan and the TRNC equally emphasize the ideological component. Both leaders and officials summed up their interactions with the political slogan “one nation, three states,” which underscores the shared Turkic origin and sets the stage for coordinated geopolitical interaction among Azerbaijan, Turkey, and the TRNC.<sup>16</sup> This slogan is a modified version of the conceptual phrase originally laid out by Heydar Aliyev to emphasize the ethno-cultural affinity underpinning closer bilateral strategic engagement between Azerbaijan and Turkey.

Moreover, Azerbaijan’s role as a key advocate for the TRNC is driven by non-material motivations and a shared ethno-centric philosophy, such as the aim “to secure the future of Turkic civilization and its place and role in the world order,” or the sentiment that “the Turkic world is our common family.”<sup>17</sup> Phrases like “your martyrs are our martyrs” and “our victory is your victory” highlight that the foundation of relations must be built on strong pan-Turkic solidarity. This politicized ethno-centric philosophy permeates all types of negotiations between Azerbaijan and the TRNC. For instance, in response to Aliyev’s statement that Turkish Cypriots are brothers to all Azeri Turks, the speaker of the North Cypriot parliament replied: “We are all Turks and belong to the Turkic nationality. We are one, we are equal, and we are all brothers. We are not different; we should be one and equal in sadness, joy, and care.”<sup>18</sup>

Thus, it comes as no surprise that the ethno-centric philosophy lies at the core of Azerbaijan’s foreign relations with the Turkic community of states. This makes the ideological component a crucial factor in Azerbaijan’s efforts to promote the international socialization of the TRNC in the global arena and within international organizations in which Baku wields significant sway.

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15. “Azerbaijan-Turkish Cyprus Working Group ‘step closer to recognition’”. *Türkiye Today*, 10 April 2024. [Online] <https://www.turkiyetoday.com/turkiye/politics-turkiye/azerbaijan-turkish-cyprus-working-group-step-closer-to-recognition-4952/> (Accessed 13/06/2024).

16. Presidency of TRNC, 2023. *President Tatar visits the Mausoleum of Heydar Aliyev, National Leader of the Republic of Azerbaijan*. [Online] <https://kktcb.org/en/president-tatar-visits-the-mausoleum-of-heydar-aliyev-national-leader-11585> (Accessed on 10/06/2024).

17. Russia Foreign Ministry. 2024. [Online] [https://mid.ru/ru/foreign\\_policy/news/1952348/](https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/1952348/) (Accessed on 21/05/2024).

18. President of the Republic of Azerbaijan 2024. *Ilham Aliyev received TURKPA delegation, 06 June*. [Online] <https://president.az/en/articles/view/66200> (Accessed on 08/06/2024).



## AZERBAIJAN'S SOCIALIZATION OF NORTHERN CYPRUS

In parallel to the process of officially recognizing Northern Cyprus, Azerbaijan has launched an international socialization campaign for the TRNC across international organizations — with a particular focus on the Organization of Turkic States. In the context of the recognition process, both Azerbaijan and the TRNC routinely cite ideological factors. Leaders and officials alike characterize their interactions with the political slogan “one nation, three states,” which underscores a shared Turkic heritage and sets the stage for coordinated geopolitical interaction among Azerbaijan, Turkey, and the TRNC. This slogan is a modified version of the conceptual phrase originally laid out by Heydar Aliyev to emphasize the ethno-cultural affinity underpinning strategic engagement between Azerbaijan and Turkey.

A former Uzbek diplomat, who spoke to ISA under the condition of anonymity, highlighted that the idea to introduce the Turkish Cypriot State to the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) originated in Baku. First proposed by then-Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev and politically initiated by Azerbaijan, Turkey, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan in 2009 in Nakhichevan, the OTS (formerly the Turkic Council) currently includes five member states: Azerbaijan, Turkey, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan, along with proactive observer states Hungary and Turkmenistan (with prospective membership in the upcoming months). The organization's aim is to accelerate the politico-economic integration of the Turkic states, based on their ethno-cultural, civilizational, and worldview affinities, with the ultimate goal of perpetuating a shared historical — and political — identity and a common posture in global affairs.

As a result of Azerbaijan’s active campaigning, the TRNC received OTS observer status in November 2022 during the ninth summit of the OTS hosted in Samarkand, Uzbekistan. The official declaration of the Samarkand summit, held under the theme “New Era for Turkic Civilization: Towards Common Development and Prosperity,” indicated the intention of the seven leaders to “consider Turkish Cypriots as part of the Turkic World and welcome the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus' OTS Observer Status.”<sup>19</sup> This recognition by the seven states (members and observers) within the framework of the OTS effectively acknowledges the de facto state of the Turkish Cypriots. Similarly, as an observer, TRNC is involved with the Parliamentary Assembly of Turkic States (TURKPA) and other adjacent organizational structures, which facilitate its international socialisation with all member and observer states of OTS. Regarding this achievement, President Aliyev stated:

"Azerbaijan worked very hard and made active diplomatic efforts in connection with the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus becoming an observer in the Organization of Turkic States, and I am very glad that the first step has already been taken. As for the transformation of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus into a full-fledged member, we as Azerbaijan support it."<sup>20</sup>

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19. Organization of Turkic States 2022. *Samarkand Declaration of the 9th Summit of the Organization of Turkic States*. [Online] <https://www.turkkon.org/assets/pdf/haberler/samarkand-declaration-2679-165.pdf> (Accessed 08/06/2024).

20. President of the Republic of Azerbaijan 2024. *Ilham Aliyev received TURKPA delegation, 06 June*. [Online] <https://president.az/en/articles/view/66200> (Accessed on 08/06/2024).

Explaining why Azerbaijan, rather than traditional advocate Turkey, plays the leading role as the international socializer for the Turkish Cypriot state, the former Uzbek diplomat emphasized several factors. Unlike Turkey, Azerbaijan shares a closer political mentality, recent political history, and similar political culture with Central Asian states. Additionally, President Aliyev maintains robust links with ruling elites in Central Asia and has greater experience — and success — in developing regional political and economic projects.

In conclusion, the ex-diplomat added that Azerbaijan invests in the representation of the TRNC not only in Central Asia but also across international organizations such as the OIC and the Non-Aligned Movement, making the eventual global recognition of the TRNC increasingly irreversible. Echoing this view, Azerbaijani PM Feyziyev, chairperson of the Azerbaijan-TRNC Parliamentary Relations Working Group, noted that Azerbaijan’s leading role in the TRNC’s recognition and international socialization process “sets an example for other Turkic states, and we expect similar steps to be taken in the Turkic republics of Central Asia.”<sup>21</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The existence of the de facto Artsakh Republic has long been both an obstacle and a pretext for Azerbaijan to maintain limited ties with the TRNC. Amid the recent collapse of Artsakh, Azerbaijan is emerging as a key international socializer for Turkish Cypriot. This shift, symbolizing broader pan-Turkic consolidation and solidarity, has the potential to break the TRNC's long-time diplomatic isolation and upend the status-quo in Cyprus. Thus, Azerbaijan’s efforts may render the international representation of the TRNC a fait accompli.

The recognition of the TRNC is no longer solely Turkey's responsibility. Azerbaijan and perhaps other like-minded partners (i.e., Central Asian states) are playing a growing role. It appears that the TRNC's formal recognition by international actors — as well as its increased representation across international forums (i.e., OTS and OIC) — is fast approaching. Nevertheless, Azerbaijan’s enthusiasm for the TRNC's recognition and its role as a socializer likely extends beyond mere bargaining with Turkey. Baku views the Northern Cyprus portfolio as a way to enhance its prestige among Turkic partners, solidifying its status as a regional power capable of achieving complex objectives related to international law and norms imposition. And the potential success of Baku's TRNC gambit may whet the Aliyev regime's resolve to shape new rules of engagement for an increasingly confrontational multipolar world.

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21. “Azerbaijan-Turkish Cyprus Working Group ‘step closer to recognition’”. *Türkiye Today*, 10 April 2024. [Online] <https://www.turkiyetoday.com/turkiye/politics-turkiye/azerbaijan-turkish-cyprus-working-group-step-closer-to-recognition-4952/> (Accessed 13/06/2024).

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