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A Transport-Centric Approach to Overcoming Stagnation in Türkiye's EU Accession Through Complex Interdependence Theory

Karmaşık Karşılıklı Bağımlılık Teorisiyle Türkiye'nin AB'ye Katılım Sürecindeki Durgunluğun Üstesinden Gelmek İçin Ulaştırma Merkezli Bir Yaklaşım

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ABSTRACT

Türkiye's accession process to the European Union has effectively entered a prolonged phase of stagnation. As of 2025, two decades after the launch of full membership negotiations, the process has lost much of its political momentum. This deadlock has been shaped by multiple political, legal, institutional, social, cultural, and economic factors. One of the most persistent obstacles concerns Türkiye's non-recognition of the Republic of Cyprus and the continuation of Cyprus-related transport restrictions. This article offers a transport-centred and analytically limited approach to this specific institutional blockage within the accession framework. Methodologically, the study employs qualitative document analysis and comparative case analysis. It examines European Commission Türkiye Reports, Council decisions, transport policy documents, the Ankara Agreement and its Additional Protocol, maritime connectivity indicators, and selected comparative cases. Drawing on complex interdependence theory, the article argues that Cyprus-related transport restrictions should not be understood merely as a diplomatic recognition issue, but also as a functional problem involving ports, vessels, customs procedures, EU institutions, trade actors, and maritime connectivity networks. The article also draws analytical parallels with Taiwan–China, Israel–Arab states, and Kosovo–EU member state cases, where commercial or institutional engagement has continued under contested or limited recognition. The study does not claim that transport policy can resolve the Cyprus dispute or guarantee Türkiye's EU accession. Rather, it argues that a narrowly framed technical-commercial opening could reduce one identifiable transport-related impediment and create a limited functional space for renewed accession-related engagement.

ÖZ

Türkiye'nin Avrupa Birliği'ne katılım süreci uzun süreli bir durgunluk aşamasına girmiştir. Tam üyelik müzakerelerinin başlamasından yirmi yıl sonra, 2025 itibarıyla süreç siyasi ivmesinin büyük bölümünü kaybetmiştir. Bu tıkanıklık, çok sayıda siyasi, hukuki, kurumsal, sosyal, kültürel ve ekonomik faktör tarafından şekillendirilmiştir. En kalıcı engellerden biri, Türkiye'nin Kıbrıs Cumhuriyeti'ni tanınamaması ve Kıbrıs bağlantılı ulaştırma kısıtlamalarının devam etmesidir. Bu makale, katılım çerçevesindeki bu özel kurumsal tıkanıklığa ulaştırma merkezli ve analitik olarak sınırlandırılmış bir yaklaşım sunmaktadır. Yöntemsel olarak çalışma, nitel belge analizi ve karşılaştırmalı vaka analizini kullanmaktadır. Avrupa Komisyonu Türkiye Raporları, Konsey kararları, ulaştırma politikası belgeleri, Ankara Anlaşması ve Ek Protokolü, deniz taşımacılığı bağlantısallık göstergeleri ve seçilmiş karşılaştırmalı vakalar incelenmektedir. Karmaşık karşılıklı bağımlılık teorisine dayanarak makale, Kıbrıs bağlantılı ulaştırma kısıtlamalarının yalnızca diplomatik tanıma meselesi olarak değil, limanlar, gemiler, gümrük süreçleri, AB kurumları, ticari aktörler ve deniz taşımacılığı ağlarını içeren işlevsel bir sorun olarak da anlaşılması gerektiğini savunmaktadır. Makale ayrıca, tartışmalı veya sınırlı tanıma koşullarında ticari ya da kurumsal angajmanın sürdüğü Tayvan–Çin, İsrail–Arap devletleri ve Kosova–AB üye devletleri vakalarıyla analitik paralellikler kurmaktadır. Çalışma, ulaştırma politikasının Kıbrıs sorununu çözebileceğini veya Türkiye'nin AB'ye katılımını garanti edeceğini iddia etmemektedir. Bunun yerine, dar kapsamlı teknik-ticari bir açılımın belirlenebilir bir ulaştırma bağlantılı engeli azaltabileceğini ve yenilenmiş katılım odaklı angajman için sınırlı bir işlevsel alan yaratabileceğini ileri sürmektedir.

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Introduction

Türkiye's EU membership negotiations began in 2005 and were officially frozen in 2018. As of 2025, two decades after the initiation of full membership talks, the accession process appears to have lost all momentum. Numerous political, social, cultural, and economic factors contribute to this stagnation, and overcoming the obstacles to Türkiye's membership seems unlikely under current conditions. One of the key impediments is the EU's acceptance of the Greek Cypriot Administration as the sole representative of the Republic of Cyprus, a position that remains politically and legally contested from Türkiye's perspective because Türkiye does not officially recognize the Republic of Cyprus. Within this context, transport has emerged as a crucial factor obstructing the resumption of negotiations. The EU consistently emphasizes Türkiye's lack of official recognition of the Republic of Cyprus, an EU member state, and the continuation of Cyprus-related transport restrictions. It also stresses that accession negotiations cannot regain momentum unless Türkiye adopts a more constructive position. This article explores whether a limited shift in Türkiye's transport policy stance, informed by comparable international cases, could support a functional opening within the accession framework. The article does not claim that a change in Türkiye's transport policy would be sufficient to secure EU membership, nor does it suggest that the Cyprus dispute itself can be resolved through transport policy alone. Rather, it argues that a carefully designed technical-commercial opening in the field of transport could reduce one specific blockage within the accession process. The scope of the study is deliberately limited to the interaction between transport policy, Cyprus-related restrictions, and Türkiye's EU accession process. Other major factors affecting Türkiye -EU relations- including democratic conditionality, rule of law, migration governance, security policy, customs union modernization, and broader geopolitical disagreements -are acknowledged but not examined in depth. The central causal mechanism examined in this article is the link between Türkiye's non-implementation of the Additional Protocol with respect to the Republic of Cyprus, the continuation of Cyprus-related restrictions on vessels and aircraft, the Council Decision of 11 December 2006, and the subsequent blockage of several negotiation chapters. In this sense, the article treats transport not merely as a sectoral policy field, but as an institutional point of linkage between recognition, customs union obligations, EU conditionality, maritime access, and the broader accession framework (Council of the European Union 2006). The continuing stagnation of the Cyprus settlement process reinforces the need to examine limited and functional alternatives. Removing or modifying the transport-related barrier would not lead to Türkiye's recognition of the Republic of Cyprus and would not guarantee EU accession. However, it could contribute to reducing one accession-related impediment and to reopening a limited space for the pursuit of mutual interests. Since the current deadlock is primarily institutional, legal, and functional rather than military, its dynamics lend themselves to analysis through complex interdependence theory, as developed by Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye in the 1970s (Keohane and Nye, 1977). The relevance of this theory lies in its emphasis on multiple channels of interaction, issue-area linkages, and the possibility of functional cooperation even when high-level political disputes remain unresolved. In this sense, the Cyprus-related transport deadlock is not only a diplomatic recognition issue; it is also a functional problem involving ports, vessels, customs procedures, EU institutions, trade actors, and regional logistics networks. The article proceeds as follows. First, it reviews the literature on Türkiye-EU relations, EU conditionality, transport integration, and the Cyprus-related accession deadlock. Second, it develops the theoretical framework by linking complex interdependence theory to transport-based functional engagement. Third, it explains the qualitative methodology and the rationale for selecting comparative cases. Fourth, it analyses the role of Cyprus-related transport restrictions in Türkiye's accession process. Fifth,

it examines selected cases of commercial engagement under contested recognition. Finally, it discusses the implications, limitations, and policy relevance of a transport-centred approach.

Literature Review

The existing literature on Europe's transportation dynamics and its various aspects is extensive and well-developed (Tzeiranaki et al. 2023; Christidis et al. 2022; Vickerman 2021; Pellegrini and Rodriguez 2013; Takman and Gonzalez-Aregall 2023; Aymen et al. 2021). These studies show that transport policy is not merely a technical or sectoral field, but also a central mechanism through which market integration, territorial cohesion, sustainability, and regulatory convergence are pursued within the European Union. However, in recent years, relatively few studies have directly examined the Common Transport Policy (CTP) in connection with Türkiye's accession process. Compared to previous years, the number of studies on Türkiye–EU relations has decreased considerably due to the stagnation of Türkiye's accession process and the prevailing perception that EU membership is becoming increasingly difficult to achieve (Eldani 2022; Visier 2009; Düzgit 2009; McLaren 2000; Müftüler-Baç 2008; Grigoriadis 2006). Accordingly, this study does not claim to be the first work on transport and European integration. Rather, it aims to make a focused contribution by examining how Cyprus-related transport restrictions operate as a functional and institutional blockage within Türkiye's EU accession process. A second body of literature examines Türkiye–EU relations through the lenses of enlargement, conditionality, democratic reform, identity politics, foreign policy alignment, and institutional credibility. In this field, the EU conditionality literature is particularly important because it explains how candidate states respond to accession incentives, rule transfer, credibility, domestic adaptation costs, and member-state preferences (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2004; Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2005; Grabbe 2006). This perspective is relevant to Türkiye because the accession process has not only been shaped by Türkiye's domestic reform trajectory, but also by the changing credibility of EU enlargement policy and the politicization of membership among existing member states (Müftüler-Baç 2008; Aydın-Düzgit and Kaliber 2016). A third strand of literature concerns the Cyprus issue and its impact on Türkiye's accession negotiations. The Cyprus question has been analysed through sovereignty, recognition, security, guarantorship, ethnic conflict, international law, and EU enlargement. However, fewer studies directly examine how Cyprus-related transport restrictions operate as a functional blockage within the accession framework. This is important because the Cyprus issue affects Türkiye–EU relations not only at the level of diplomatic recognition, but also through concrete policy areas such as ports, aviation, customs procedures, maritime access, and the implementation of the Additional Protocol. In this respect, the contribution of this article lies in bringing together three bodies of literature that are often treated separately: Türkiye–EU accession studies, Cyprus-related recognition and restriction debates, and maritime transport connectivity. The theoretical literature on complex interdependence provides the analytical bridge for this argument. Keohane and Nye's original formulation of complex interdependence emphasizes multiple channels of interaction, the absence of a fixed hierarchy among issue areas, and the reduced utility of military force under conditions of dense economic and institutional interdependence (Keohane and Nye 1977). In their later reassessment, they further clarify the continuing relevance of interdependence for analysing issue linkage and cooperation under conditions of political constraint (Keohane and Nye 1987). These assumptions are relevant to the Cyprus-related transport deadlock because the issue is not confined to military or diplomatic relations alone. It also involves logistics networks, maritime connectivity, customs procedures, port access, aviation restrictions, EU institutions, commercial actors, and regional trade flows. In this sense, the article seeks to make a modest but specific contribution to the literature. It does not argue that transport policy can resolve the Cyprus dispute or guarantee Türkiye's EU accession. Instead, it argues that transport

restrictions constitute one identifiable institutional blockage and that their technical-commercial reconsideration may create a limited opening within a broader and highly complex accession process.

Theoretical Framework on the Cyprus Conflict

Complex interdependence theory, developed by Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye, explains international relations through multiple channels of interaction among states, societies, institutions, and non-state actors. The theory is based on three principal assumptions: the existence of multiple channels connecting societies, the absence of a fixed hierarchy among issue areas, and the reduced utility of military force under conditions of dense economic and institutional interdependence (Keohane and Nye 1977; Keohane and Nye 1987). Accordingly, political disagreement in one issue area does not necessarily prevent functional cooperation in others. In this study, complex interdependence theory provides the analytical basis for examining whether transport-related technical and commercial engagement can continue despite unresolved political recognition. The Cyprus problem is a multifaceted and long-standing conflict that has been analysed from various theoretical perspectives due to its historical, political, ethnic, legal, and geopolitical complexity. No single theory can fully explain or resolve the dispute. However, this study adopts complex interdependence theory because it provides a suitable framework for analysing how political non-recognition, transport restrictions, customs procedures, EU conditionality, maritime access, and regional logistics networks interact within the same institutional field. Complex interdependence theory is particularly relevant to this study because it allows the Cyprus-related transport deadlock to be analysed beyond the narrow boundaries of military security or formal diplomacy. These assumptions are directly applicable to the transport dimension of Türkiye's EU accession process, where diplomatic non-recognition, port access, aviation restrictions, customs procedures, EU conditionality, and maritime connectivity interact within the same institutional field. Other theoretical perspectives also offer useful insights but are less suitable for the specific focus of this article. Realist approaches emphasize power, security, and national interests, while structuralist and identity-based approaches focus on ideas, norms, perceptions, and collective identities. Marxist and political economy perspectives draw attention to material interests, strategic geography, systemic inequalities, and the economic value of natural resources. Liberal theory, by contrast, emphasizes institutions, cooperation, trade, and international organizations. However, despite the involvement of institutions such as the UN, NATO, and the EU, a comprehensive settlement has not been achieved. The Annan Plan, developed by then-UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan (Loizides and McGarry 2019), represented a significant opportunity for resolving the issue but ultimately failed to produce a settlement. The subsequent accession of the Greek Cypriot side to the EU further complicated the dispute and introduced new institutional barriers into Türkiye's accession process. In this study, complex interdependence theory is used not as a general rhetorical frame but as an analytical tool. First, the concept of multiple channels helps explain how interaction between Türkiye, the EU, and the Republic of Cyprus may occur through ports, shipping companies, customs procedures, logistics networks, EU institutions, and trade actors even when formal diplomatic recognition remains unresolved. Second, the absence of a fixed hierarchy among issue areas explains why transport policy, although often treated as a technical field, may become strategically significant when linked to recognition, accession conditionality, and customs union obligations. Third, the reduced utility of military force is relevant because the current Cyprus-related accession blockage is primarily institutional, legal, and functional rather than military. This theoretical framing also helps distinguish between formal diplomatic recognition and transport-based operational engagement. Formal recognition remains a high-level political and legal issue. By contrast, transport-based operational engagement may be

framed as a limited technical-commercial arrangement involving access, procedures, and connectivity rather than diplomatic normalization. Accordingly, the article does not argue that complex interdependence theory provides a complete solution to the Cyprus problem. Rather, it uses the theory to examine whether a limited transport-centred opening could reduce one specific accession-related impediment under conditions of unresolved political recognition.

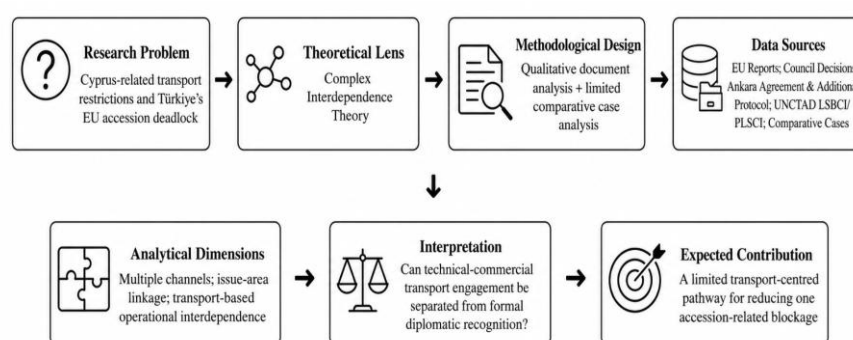
Impediments in Türkiye's Accession Negotiations

The accession negotiations, which were initiated in 2005 (European Council 2005), have effectively come to a standstill. Without a shift in the current dynamics, no substantial progress is anticipated in the near future (Keskin 2021). The Country Report identifies numerous issues that Türkiye must address to advance its bid for membership (European Commission 2023). In this broader context, the conditions outlined in the Council decision that contributed to the freezing of negotiations with Türkiye would need to be reconsidered within the accession framework (Council of the European 2018). The stagnation of Türkiye's accession process should not be attributed to a single factor. It reflects the combined effect of political conditionality, rule of law concerns, geopolitical divergence, customs union debates, migration governance, identity-related contestation, and the unresolved Cyprus issue. However, this article focuses specifically on one identifiable blockage within this broader framework: Cyprus-related transport restrictions and their implications for the accession process. This delimitation is necessary to avoid treating Türkiye–EU relations as a general political problem and instead to analyse the transport dimension as a concrete institutional and functional issue. In this respect, the article does not claim that the removal or modification of transport restrictions would be sufficient to overcome all accession-related obstacles. Rather, it argues that transport restrictions constitute one specific and institutionally embedded impediment whose reconsideration may create a limited functional opening. This analytical focus is consistent with the complex interdependence perspective because it examines how a seemingly technical policy area can become linked to recognition, customs union obligations, EU conditionality, maritime access, and regional connectivity.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design combining document analysis and comparative case analysis. The purpose is not to produce a statistical or econometric explanation of Türkiye's EU accession process, but to examine whether a transport-centred functional opening can be analytically justified within the framework of complex interdependence theory. First, the study relies on document analysis. The primary documents examined include European Commission Türkiye Reports, Council decisions, EU transport policy documents, documents related to the Ankara Agreement and its Additional Protocol, and policy texts concerning the Common Transport Policy and the Trans-European Transport Network. These documents are used to identify how Cyprus-related transport restrictions have been framed within the EU accession process and how they have affected the opening, suspension, or blockage of relevant negotiation chapters. Second, the study uses maritime connectivity indicators as supporting empirical evidence. The Liner Shipping Bilateral Connectivity Index and the Port Liner Shipping Connectivity Index are used to assess maritime transport connectivity among selected country pairs and ports. These indicators are not independently constructed by the authors; they are standardized maritime connectivity measures developed and published by UNCTAD (UNCTADSTATa, 2024; UNCTADSTATb 2024). Accordingly, interdependence is used here specifically in a transport-based operational sense, not as a general political or macroeconomic dependency relationship. Third, the study employs comparative case analysis. The cases of Taiwan–China, Israel–selected Arab countries, and Kosovo–selected EU member states are examined because they involve commercial, economic, institutional, or transport-related engagement despite contested,

limited, or politically sensitive recognition. The comparative logic is not based on legal identity but on functional similarity. Each case involves politically sensitive recognition conditions alongside practical engagement, making them relevant for assessing whether technical-commercial engagement can be partially distinguished from formal diplomatic recognition. The study has several limitations. It does not claim that transport policy can resolve the Cyprus dispute, that Türkiye's EU accession depends solely on the removal or modification of transport restrictions, or that the selected comparative cases are legally identical to the Cyprus question. Rather, the article offers a focused analysis of one transport-related blockage within a much broader accession process. Its contribution lies in clarifying how transport policy, maritime connectivity, and functional interdependence may interact under conditions of unresolved political recognition. The methodological structure of the article is summarized in Figure 1.



Note: LSBCI = Liner Shipping Bilateral Connectivity Index; PLSCI = Port Liner Shipping Connectivity Index (UNCTAD).

Figure 1: Analytical Framework and Methodological Flow of the Study

Transport Matters to the EU

Transport is closely linked to the economic, social, and political objectives of the EU and was one of the earliest common policy areas of European integration, alongside the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). The sector employs more than 10 million people across Europe and contributes approximately 5% of the EU's GDP. It also supports the functioning of the common market, which encompasses nearly 450 million consumers and depends on transport networks that facilitate the free movement of persons, goods, and services (European Commission 2011; European Commission 2018; European Commission 2020a). At the same time, transport creates significant environmental and social challenges, including greenhouse gas emissions, air pollution, noise, road accidents, and congestion (European Commission 2020a; European Commission 2020b). The EU's recent transport strategy therefore aims to promote fair, safe, accessible, and sustainable mobility. It is aligned with the 2030 Climate Target Plan and the objective of reducing transport-related emissions by 90% by 2050 (European Commission 2020c). For this reason, transport policy should not be understood merely as a technical or sectoral field. It is also an institutional mechanism through which market integration, territorial cohesion, regulatory convergence, sustainability, and external connectivity are produced. In this respect, the Common Transport Policy is not only about mobility within Europe; it also reflects the EU's capacity to structure its external relations through infrastructure, corridors, logistics networks, environmental standards, and regulatory alignment.

Türkiye's Transport Dynamics

Transport is significant for Türkiye because of its strategic position between Asia and Europe and its maritime geography, with seas surrounding the country on three sides. The Middle Corridor, also known as the China–Central Asia–West Asia Corridor, connects China

and East Asian markets with Europe through Central Asia, the Caspian Sea, the Caucasus, and Türkiye. In this respect, transport functions as a vital lever for Türkiye's long-term goal of becoming a connector between Asia and Europe (Hussain 2021). Türkiye's historical role along the ancient Silk Road also reinforces this strategic orientation. Today, Türkiye aims to maintain this advantage by developing transport infrastructure that supports the integration of different transport modes (Strategy and Budget Directorate 2022). The Turkish government has undertaken various large-scale infrastructure projects to develop maritime, road, rail, and air transport, including bridges across the Turkish straits, underwater rail and road tunnel projects, and major airport investments designed to strengthen uninterrupted connectivity between Asia and Europe. Türkiye's geostrategic location also gives it importance in relation to Europe's energy supply security. Its proximity to the Middle East and the Caspian region enhances Türkiye's role as an energy transit country through pipeline networks (Mišik and Nosko 2023; Streimikiene et al. 2023). At the same time, Türkiye faces several domestic transport constraints. The concentration of production in the Marmara Basin and consumption in Istanbul generates pressure on urban and interregional transport systems, while other major metropolitan areas, particularly Ankara and Izmir, face similar challenges. Economic volatility after the Covid-19 period, rising exchange rates, and cost pressures have also affected the competitiveness of Turkish transport companies. Rail transport remains another limitation, since not every province in Türkiye is yet connected by conventional rail and only part of the railway network is electrified and operationally efficient. Maritime transport carries a major share of Türkiye's foreign trade, yet the leading ports are concentrated around the Marmara Sea. Domestic air cargo development is also constrained by limited market volume in eastern Türkiye, especially for high-technology products (Keskin 2016). Türkiye's geography therefore gives transport policy a dual meaning. Domestically, it is a tool of economic modernization and logistics integration. Externally, it is a mechanism of regional connectivity and geopolitical positioning. These investments and geostrategic advantages make Türkiye a central actor in the EU's broader connectivity agenda, particularly in relation to transport corridors, maritime access, energy routes, and the resilience of Europe–Asia supply chains. The constraints identified above do not reduce Türkiye's strategic transport relevance; rather, they show why transport policy remains a central field of reform, integration, and negotiation in Türkiye–EU relations. From the perspective of complex interdependence theory, Türkiye–EU transport relations illustrate the importance of multiple channels of interaction. These channels include not only state-level negotiations but also customs procedures, shipping companies, port authorities, logistics firms, infrastructure corridors, EU regulatory frameworks, and maritime connectivity indicators. Cyprus-related transport restrictions should therefore be analysed within this broader network of institutional and operational interdependence. They affect not only symbolic questions of recognition but also the practical operation of transport corridors, maritime access, trade facilitation, and accession-related regulatory alignment. Accordingly, transport constitutes a particularly useful policy field for examining whether a limited technical-commercial opening could reduce one accession-related blockage without prejudging the final political status of the Cyprus issue.

The Impact of Transport on Türkiye's Accession to the EU

One of the most relevant institutional assessments of transport-related issues in Türkiye's accession process is provided by the latest Türkiye Report (European Commission 2024). Several chapters related to transport policy, including Chapter 14 on Transport Policy, Chapter 15 on Energy, Chapter 21 on Trans-European Networks, and Chapter 27 on Environment and Climate Change, are grouped under Cluster 4, entitled “The Green Agenda and Sustainable Connectivity”.

The report indicates that previous recommendations were only partially addressed and remain relevant. It also assesses Türkiye as having a medium level of preparation in transport policy and records limited progress during the reporting period. However, it underlines that Türkiye will continue to face difficulties in fully complying with the EU acquis in this chapter as long as restrictions on Cyprus-bound vessels and aircraft remain in place. The central issue is therefore not transport policy in isolation, but the way in which Cyprus-related transport restrictions have become institutionally linked to recognition, customs union obligations, and the accession negotiation framework. Türkiye does not formally recognize the Republic of Cyprus and maintains restrictions on Cyprus-linked vessels and aircraft. The EU, by contrast, treats the Republic of Cyprus as a member state and considers Türkiye's obligations toward all member states as part of the accession process. This divergence transforms a transport-related issue into a broader institutional blockage.

The Transport-Related Political Roots of the Accession Freeze

Türkiye's non-recognition of the Republic of Cyprus and the continuation of Cyprus-related transport restrictions have become major impediments to Türkiye's EU accession negotiations. A broader settlement of the Cyprus problem appears unlikely in the near future because of the historical, political, and culturally entrenched character of the conflict. The Annan Plan, proposed two decades ago, represented a significant opportunity for settlement but ultimately failed when the Greek Cypriot side rejected it in the referendum, despite approval from the Turkish Cypriot side (UN Security Council 2003; Loizides and McGarry 2019). The subsequent accession of the Republic of Cyprus to the EU introduced a new layer of complexity into Türkiye's accession process. Although the *de facto* division of the island began in 1974, the transport-related dimension of the dispute became more visible from 1987 onwards. In that year, foreign-flagged vessels that had previously called at ports in Northern Cyprus, including Kyrenia, Famagusta, and Gemikonağı, faced legal and administrative difficulties in the Republic of Cyprus. In response, Türkiye closed its ports to Cyprus-flagged vessels. Since then, restrictions on the entry of Cyprus-flagged vessels into Turkish ports have become one of the most concrete transport-related manifestations of the Cyprus dispute. The timing was politically significant because this occurred in the same year as Türkiye's application for full membership of the European Community. At the EU Summit of 17 December 2004, Türkiye's accession perspective was linked to the signing of the Additional Protocol extending the Ankara Agreement to the new EU member states (Council of the European Union, 2005; Council of the European Union, 2018). Türkiye signed the Additional Protocol in 2005, thereby extending the Ankara Agreement to the ten member states that had joined the EU in 2004, including the Republic of Cyprus. However, Türkiye maintained that signing the Additional Protocol should not be interpreted as formal recognition of the Republic of Cyprus. Following the signature of the Additional Protocol, Türkiye issued a unilateral declaration known as the Cyprus Declaration. In this declaration, Türkiye argued that the Greek Cypriot Administration referred to in the Additional Protocol was not equivalent to the partnership Republic established in 1960 by Turkish Cypriots and Greek Cypriots. Türkiye defined the Greek Cypriot Administration as exercising authority only south of the buffer zone, while reaffirming its position as a guarantor state and stating that ratification of the Additional Protocol should not be interpreted as implicit recognition of the Republic of Cyprus (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Türkiye 2005). However, this unilateral declaration was not legally binding on the EU (Talmon 2006). This distinction is central to the argument of this article. Türkiye's position has been to separate the implementation of the Additional Protocol from formal diplomatic recognition, whereas the EU has treated the full and non-discriminatory implementation of accession-related obligations toward all member states as inseparable from the accession framework. The transport issue therefore sits at the intersection of legal interpretation, recognition policy, customs union

obligations, and accession conditionality. The disagreement became more concrete on 22 February 2006, when Turkish authorities prevented a Cyprus-flagged vessel, ABLE-F, from entering Mersin Port. The EU and the Republic of Cyprus sought to challenge the continuation of restrictions that had existed since 1987, while Türkiye avoided any action that could be interpreted as international recognition of the Republic of Cyprus (Pedi and Kouskouvelis 2019). From the EU legal perspective, transport-related restrictions were also connected to the free movement of goods and the proper functioning of the Customs Union (Shaelou, 2011; Judgment of the Court 1983; Judgment of the Court 1997; EU–Türkiye Association Agreement 1963). The Council Decision of 11 December 2006 transformed this disagreement into a direct institutional blockage within the accession process. The Council stated that chapters covering policy areas relevant to Türkiye’s restrictions concerning the Republic of Cyprus would not be opened until the European Commission verified that Türkiye had fulfilled its commitments related to the Additional Protocol. As a result, eight chapters were blocked: Chapter 1 on Free Movement of Goods, Chapter 3 on Right of Establishment and Freedom to Provide Services, Chapter 9 on Financial Services, Chapter 11 on Agriculture and Rural Development, Chapter 13 on Fisheries, Chapter 14 on Transport Policy, Chapter 29 on Customs Union, and Chapter 30 on External Relations (Council of the European Union 2006). From the perspective of complex interdependence theory, this development is analytically significant. A seemingly technical issue—access of vessels and aircraft—became linked to recognition, customs union obligations, transport policy, free movement of goods, maritime access, and EU conditionality. This confirms that transport is not subordinate to high politics; rather, it is a field in which legal, economic, institutional, and political questions intersect. The Cyprus problem remains a complex political issue involving territorial disputes, security concerns, power-sharing arrangements, property questions, displaced populations, and, more recently, hydrocarbon-related tensions (İlksoy 2017; Erşen and Çelikpala 2019). Therefore, instead of waiting for a comprehensive settlement, it is analytically useful to examine whether a narrower functional opening in transport could reduce one accession-related impediment. This does not mean bypassing the Cyprus problem or denying its political significance. Rather, it means asking whether a technical-commercial transport arrangement can be distinguished from formal diplomatic recognition without prejudging the final political settlement of the Cyprus issue.

An Overview of Trade between the Greek Cypriot Administration and Türkiye

Considering the potential advantages of establishing economic and transport-related relations with the Republic of Cyprus, as well as the possible costs of maintaining restrictions, it is useful to incorporate the economic and social dimensions of the issue into the analysis. However, due to economies of scale and the significant asymmetry between the parties, the absence of direct commercial ties is unlikely to have a major macroeconomic impact on either side. These asymmetries are visible in GDP, population size, industrial capacity, and trade structure. According to World Bank data, Türkiye’s economy and population are substantially larger than those of the Republic of Cyprus, while the trade profiles of the two parties also differ significantly. Türkiye’s major exports, including jewellery, petroleum oils, iron and steel products, commercial vehicles, and automobiles, differ from the more limited export profile of the Republic of Cyprus (World Bank 2022). Therefore, the removal or modification of transport restrictions is not expected to create a major bilateral trade effect by itself. This point is further illustrated by the Liner Shipping Bilateral Connectivity Index (LSBCI), presented in Figure 2. Figure 2 shows the bilateral liner shipping connectivity of Türkiye and the Republic of Cyprus with selected trade-related countries. The figure was created by the authors using LSBCI data published by UNCTAD Statistics. The current LSBCI is composed of five components: the number of transshipments required to move from one country to another, the number of common direct connections, the number of common connections with one transshipment, the

level of competition in services connecting the two countries, and the capacity of the largest ship operating on the weakest route between them. These components are normalized to produce a dimensionless index (UNCTADSTATa 2024).

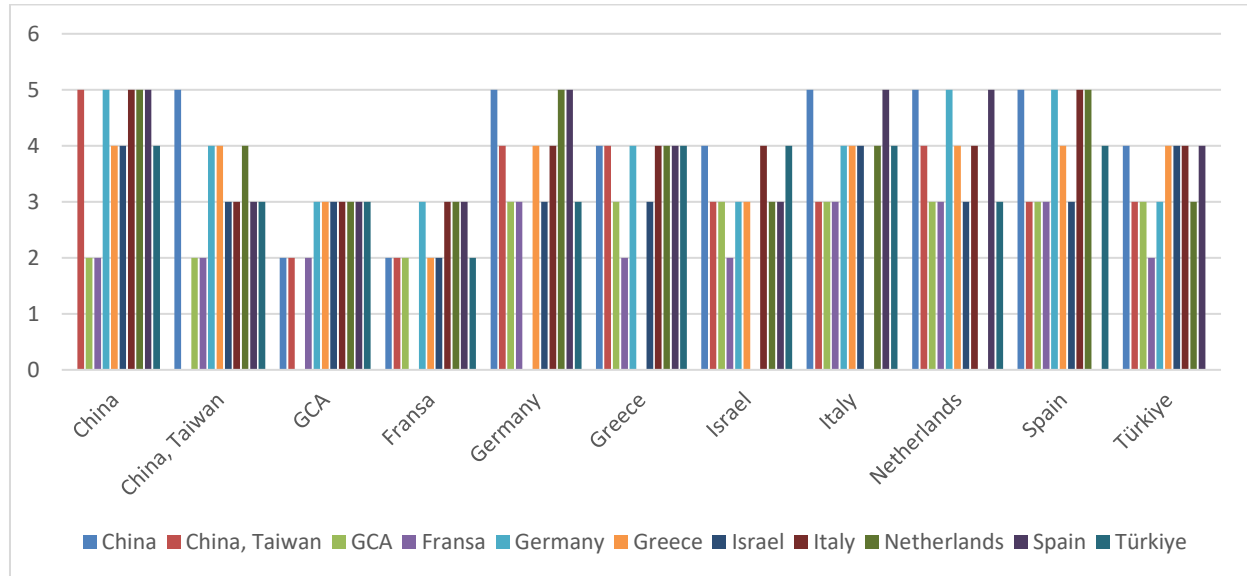


Figure 2: Liner Shipping Bilateral Connectivity Index, Quarterly (Created by the authors using data from UNCTAD Statistics.)

Figure 2 presents the Liner Shipping Bilateral Connectivity Index (LSBCI) values for Türkiye, the Republic of Cyprus, and selected countries with which they have commercial or transport-related relations. The LSBCI is a standardized UNCTAD indicator used to measure bilateral liner shipping connectivity between country pairs. It consists of five components: transshipment requirements, common direct connections, common connections with one transshipment, competition levels on services connecting the country pair, and the size of the largest ship operating on the weakest route (UNCTADSTATa 2024). To establish a unit-free index, UNCTAD normalizes the raw values of each component using the following formula:

$$\text{Normalized_Value} = \frac{(\text{Raw} - \text{Min(Raw)})}{\text{Max(Raw)} - \text{Min(Raw)}}$$

After normalization, the LSBCI is calculated as the simple average of the five normalized components. The index ranges from 0 to 1, where higher values indicate stronger bilateral liner shipping connectivity. For the transshipment component, UNCTAD uses the complement to unity, $1 - \text{Normalized Value}$, so that higher values consistently correspond to stronger connectivity. If the reference values change over time, the LSBCI series may be recomputed to ensure consistency across editions. In this study, the LSBCI values of approximately 0.3–0.4 observed for Türkiye and the Republic of Cyprus are interpreted as indicating a meaningful level of transport-based operational connectivity within the liner shipping network. Interdependence is therefore used here in a maritime-transport sense, not as a general political or macroeconomic dependency claim. The observed Türkiye–Republic of Cyprus values show that Cyprus-related transport restrictions operate within a measurable field of maritime connectivity rather than within a purely symbolic diplomatic context. The analysis therefore moves from bilateral country-pair connectivity to port-level integration by examining the Port Liner Shipping Connectivity Index (PLSCI) values for Türkiye’s major container ports and the Port of Limassol in Figure 3.

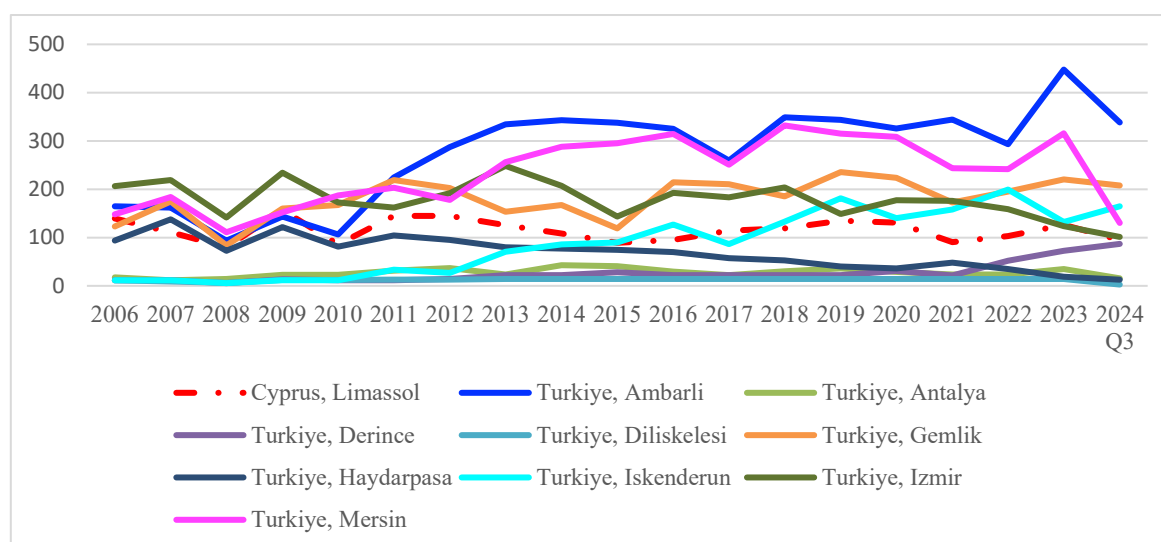


Figure 3: Port Liner Shipping Connectivity Index (PLSCI), Quarterly (Created by the authors using data from UNCTAD Statistics.)

The Port Liner Shipping Connectivity Index (PLSCI) extends the analysis from country-pair connectivity to port-level integration by showing the degree to which a port is connected to global liner shipping networks. A higher PLSCI value indicates stronger port connectivity, and the index is benchmarked to the highest observed port connectivity value in the first quarter of 2006, which is set at 100. The PLSCI consists of several components, including scheduled ship calls, deployed annual capacity in Twenty-Foot Equivalent Units (TEU), regular liner shipping services, liner shipping companies operating at the port, the TEU capacity of the largest ship deployed, and the number of countries directly connected by regular liner shipping services (UNCTADSTATb 2024). As shown in Figure 3, Ambarlı and Mersin display a significant increase in connectivity after 2010, indicating the growing integration of Türkiye's major container ports into global liner shipping networks. By contrast, Limassol follows a relatively stable pattern, with no comparable structural increase over the observed period. This asymmetry suggests that the transport relationship between Türkiye and the Republic of Cyprus should not be understood primarily as a question of large-scale bilateral trade potential. Rather, it should be analysed as an institutional and operational issue embedded in measurable maritime connectivity structures. These indicators should be interpreted with caution. LSBCI and PLSCI do not measure diplomatic recognition, political legitimacy, or the overall macroeconomic dependence of the parties. They measure liner shipping connectivity and port integration. Their relevance lies in showing that Cyprus-related transport restrictions operate within a concrete operational transport environment. From the perspective of complex interdependence theory, political non-recognition therefore coexists with measurable maritime connectivity, supporting the argument that technical-commercial engagement may be analytically distinguished from formal diplomatic recognition.

Commercial Engagement under Contested or Limited Recognition

Commercial, economic, institutional, or transport-related engagement may continue even when political recognition is contested, limited, or incomplete. This does not mean that the Cyprus issue can be directly equated with other cases, since the historical background, legal status, security context, and institutional setting of each case differ considerably. However, the comparative logic of this section is based not on legal identity but on functional similarity. The cases examined here are analytically relevant because they show that practical engagement may coexist with unresolved or politically sensitive recognition disputes. The first case is Taiwan and the People's Republic of China (PRC). The PRC considers Taiwan to be part of its territory,

while Taiwan operates as a separate, self-governing entity with its own political institutions and economic system. Although Taiwan is not formally recognized as a sovereign state by many countries, it maintains extensive commercial and investment relations with a wide range of partners, including the PRC itself. This case shows that economic and commercial relations can persist even where formal political recognition is absent, limited, or contested (Dittmer 2017; Yahuda 1996). The second case concerns Israel and selected Arab states. Following a series of Arab–Israeli wars, many Arab states refused for decades to recognize Israel diplomatically because of political, territorial, and security disputes. Egypt recognized Israel through the 1979 peace treaty, and Jordan followed in 1994. In 2020, the Abraham Accords created a new phase of normalization involving the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan, although the form and depth of normalization have varied across countries. These developments show that commercial interaction may precede, accompany, or develop alongside formal political normalization (Joubbran 1995; Vakil and Quilliam 2023; Zisser 2023). The third case is Kosovo and the EU member states that do not recognize its independence. Several EU members, including Spain, Slovakia, Greece, Romania, and the Republic of Cyprus, have not recognized Kosovo as an independent state. Nevertheless, the EU maintains structured engagement with Kosovo in areas such as institutional reform, rule of law, governance, economic development, and regional cooperation. Trade and institutional interaction also continue despite the absence of unanimous recognition among EU member states. This case is particularly relevant because it shows that, even within the European institutional framework, recognition disputes do not necessarily prevent functional, economic, or institutional engagement. Taken together, these cases show that the relationship between recognition and engagement is not binary. They do not provide a direct legal model for Türkiye and the Republic of Cyprus, nor do they imply that Türkiye can simply replicate any of them. However, they support the broader proposition that technical-commercial engagement may, under certain conditions, be distinguished from formal diplomatic recognition. From the perspective of complex interdependence theory, these cases illustrate the persistence of multiple channels of interaction under political constraint. Even when high-level recognition remains blocked or contested, trade, transport, logistics, customs, investment, and institutional channels may continue to operate. This is why Cyprus-related transport restrictions should be examined not only as a recognition issue, but also as a functional interdependence problem within Türkiye’s EU accession process.

Discussion and Counter-Arguments

The transport-centred approach proposed in this article requires careful interpretation. It does not suggest that the Cyprus dispute can be resolved through transport policy alone, nor does it claim that Türkiye’s accession process depends exclusively on the removal or modification of Cyprus-related transport restrictions. Rather, the argument is deliberately narrower: transport restrictions constitute one identifiable and institutionally embedded blockage within a broader accession deadlock, and their technical-commercial reconsideration may reduce one obstacle without prejudging the final political status of the Cyprus issue. A first counter-argument is that allowing vessels or aircraft linked to the Republic of Cyprus to access Turkish ports or airports could be interpreted as implicit diplomatic recognition. This concern is politically and legally significant. However, the distinction between formal diplomatic recognition and technical-commercial engagement is not unprecedented in international practice. As discussed in the comparative cases, states and international actors have sometimes maintained economic, commercial, transport-related, or institutional relations under conditions of contested recognition (Dittmer 2017; Yahuda 1996; Vakil and Quilliam 2023; Zisser 2023). The central question, therefore, is not whether engagement automatically equals recognition, but whether such engagement can be legally framed in a way that explicitly excludes recognition. For such a distinction to be credible, any transport-related arrangement would need

to be narrowly designed and accompanied by explicit legal reservations stating that the measure does not constitute formal recognition of the Republic of Cyprus. The arrangement could be limited to port access, aviation procedures, customs processing, or maritime trade facilitation, without extending to diplomatic relations, embassy-level representation, or political recognition. Since the Republic of Cyprus or the EU could still interpret such a step as a political concession, the measure would need to be precise, conditional, and institutionally mediated, preferably within an EU-mediated technical protocol focused specifically on transport facilitation. A further counter-argument is that Türkiye–EU relations are shaped by many factors beyond transport policy, including rule of law, democratic conditionality, migration governance, customs union modernization, foreign policy alignment, and geopolitical disagreements (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2004; Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2005; Grabbe 2006; Müftüler-Baç 2008; Aydın-Düzgüt and Kaliber 2016). This point is valid. The article does not deny the multidimensional nature of Türkiye–EU relations. It instead isolates one specific blockage, namely Cyprus-related transport restrictions, in order to examine whether a limited functional opening is possible in that field. Another limitation concerns the economic significance of Türkiye–Republic of Cyprus trade. Given the asymmetry between the two economies, the commercial volume that could emerge from removing or modifying transport restrictions may remain limited. However, the policy relevance of the proposed opening does not derive primarily from bilateral trade volume. Its significance lies in its potential to reduce an institutional blockage connected to the accession framework. Similarly, the comparative cases of Taiwan–China, Israel–Arab states, and Kosovo–EU member states are not legally identical to the Cyprus issue, but they remain analytically relevant because they involve politically sensitive recognition conditions alongside continuing commercial, economic, transport-related, or institutional engagement. From the perspective of complex interdependence theory, these counter-arguments reinforce rather than weaken the analytical relevance of transport policy. They show that the Cyprus-related accession blockage is not a single-issue problem but a multi-channel interaction involving law, politics, trade, transport, customs, ports, shipping networks, and EU institutions. Therefore, the proposed transport-centred approach should be understood as a cautious and limited policy alternative.

Conclusion

Türkiye’s EU membership negotiations, which commenced in 2005, were officially frozen in 2018. By 2025, two decades after the initiation of full membership discussions, the accession process had effectively stalled. This prolonged deadlock is driven by a combination of political, social, cultural, economic, institutional, and geopolitical factors. Within this broader context, this article has focused on one specific and institutionally embedded blockage: the interaction between Türkiye’s non-recognition of the Republic of Cyprus, Cyprus-related transport restrictions, customs union obligations, maritime access, and the accession negotiation framework. The article does not claim that the Cyprus dispute can be resolved through transport policy, nor does it argue that Türkiye’s accession process depends solely on the removal or modification of Cyprus-related transport restrictions. Its argument is deliberately narrower. Transport restrictions constitute one identifiable impediment within the accession deadlock, and their technical-commercial reconsideration may create a limited functional opening without prejudging the final political status of the Cyprus issue. The findings support this argument in three ways. First, complex interdependence theory helps explain why transport policy matters in this context. The Cyprus-related transport issue is not confined to formal diplomacy or military security; it involves ports, vessels, airlines, customs procedures, logistics firms, EU institutions, trade actors, and maritime connectivity structures. Second, LSBCI and PLSCI indicators show that Cyprus-related transport restrictions operate within a measurable maritime connectivity environment, even though these indicators do not measure diplomatic recognition

or political legitimacy. Third, the comparative cases of Taiwan–China, Israel–Arab states, and Kosovo–EU member states demonstrate that recognition and practical engagement are not always mutually exclusive. The economic significance of such an opening should not be overstated. Potential direct commercial gains from Türkiye–Republic of Cyprus trade may remain limited because of the asymmetry between the two economies. However, the strategic relevance of the proposed opening lies not in bilateral trade volume, but in reducing one specific institutional blockage connected to the accession framework. Accordingly, Türkiye could consider modifying certain transport-related restrictions through a narrowly defined technical-commercial framework, provided that such a step is accompanied by explicit legal reservations excluding formal diplomatic recognition. Similarly, the EU could explore whether limited transport facilitation can be separated from the final political settlement of the Cyprus issue and from the broader question of formal recognition. The broader contribution of the article is not to offer a definitive solution to Türkiye’s accession deadlock, but to identify a functional area where cautious and legally framed engagement may still be possible. Transport policy cannot replace a comprehensive political settlement in Cyprus or resolve the wider crisis in Türkiye–EU relations. However, it reveals one concrete and institutionally embedded blockage that may be more amenable to technical reconsideration than the wider political dispute. The value of this approach lies in showing that even entrenched political deadlocks may contain functional areas where cautious, legally framed, and mutually beneficial engagement remains possible.

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