

IZZET YALIN YOKSEL

Hierarchy, Identity, and Patterns of Elite Navigation: Patron–Client Relations of Dependent Polities



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LIST OF PUBLICATIONS*

The following three original publications form the main body of the dissertation:

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- III. Yüksel, İzzet Yalin. 2025. 'Respect and Compliance: Navigating U.S. – CoFA Patron – Client Relations'. *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 80 (2): 206–225.
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Author's contribution

- I. The first article draws on the author's extensive fieldwork and empirical findings. The manuscript was conceptually developed and drafted by Eiki Berg, while the author contributed to the theoretical development of the study by incorporating insights from ontological security theory. Overall, the author's contribution amounted to 55%, compared to 45% for Eiki Berg.
- II. In the second article, the author conducted the data collection and analysis, wrote the manuscript, and led the revision and review process (65%). Eiki Berg contributed through forming the research design, editing, and by providing feedback and guidance during the writing process (35%).
- III. The third article is single-authored by the author of this dissertation.

* The publications included in this dissertation were published under the name "İzzet Yalin Yüksel." Due to the internationalised spelling used in the University of Tartu's administrative records, the author's name appears as "İzzet Yalin Youksel" in this dissertation.

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1. INTRODUCTION

This dissertation investigates the strategic behavior of dependent polities¹—including partially recognized de facto states and internationally recognized microstates—in patron–client relationships (PCRs) by examining how political elites navigate demands and dependencies under conditions of ontological insecurity. It asks how elite actors in dependent polities respond to external pressure while seeking to preserve identity, autonomy, and legitimacy. Focusing on the cases of Northern Cyprus, Abkhazia, and the Compact of Free Association (CoFA) states in relation to Turkey, Russia, and the United States respectively, the study applies a shared theoretical framework grounded in PCRs and ontological security theory (OST). These cases were selected to explore variation in client strategies—ranging from defiance and dictation to calibration and conformation—across structurally asymmetric relationships. The central concern is to assess how client states with limited international recognition or constrained strategic autonomy pursue meaningful action in environments shaped by persistent external influence and existential uncertainty. While each article develops its argument independently, this introductory chapter of the dissertation provides a unifying conceptual and comparative lens. It draws together the findings of the three articles to address shared research questions and to develop an integrated analytical framework for analyzing how material, relational, and symbolic asymmetries shape client behavior across varied geopolitical and institutional contexts.

Despite differences in legal status and international recognition, the cases examined in this dissertation share a common structural condition: persistent dependence on a dominant external actor for security, economic viability, or international access. In this sense, they can be described as dependent polities—a descriptive category used to capture political entities whose autonomy is formally or informally constrained by asymmetric relationships. Recent scholarship also demonstrates that structural dependence itself is not uniform but varies in both degree and composition across patron–client relationships. Patron–client ties

¹ This dissertation uses the term *dependent polities* as a conceptual umbrella encompassing partially recognized de facto states and internationally recognized microstates. While these entities differ in legal status, both are characterized by structural external dependence, constrained sovereignty, and asymmetric integration with larger patron states. Building on Comai's (2018) conceptualization of post-Soviet de facto states as *small dependent jurisdictions*, this study adopts a functional rather than status-based lens. Comai demonstrates that de facto states exhibit patterns of economic reliance, security dependence, and institutional integration comparable to those observed in internationally recognized microstates and non-sovereign territories. By foregrounding dependence rather than recognition as the key analytical variable, the term *dependent polities* allows for a unified framework that captures variation in legal status without fragmenting the analysis into separate ontological categories. This move does not collapse important political distinctions between de facto states and microstates, but instead emphasizes their shared structural condition within hierarchical international relations.

differ in the extent of military, political, economic, societal, and connectivity dependence, producing different configurations of asymmetry (Vits, 2025). The present dissertation recognizes this variation but does not seek to measure asymmetry itself. Rather, it treats structural dependence as the shared contextual condition within which elite navigation unfolds.

It is also important to distinguish between international recognition and recognition in the ontological sense. International recognition refers to the legal-diplomatic acknowledgment of statehood by other states and shapes the external security environment within which dependent polities operate. Recognition in the ontological sense refers to the acknowledgment and validation of identity through processes of respect and social affirmation. While these dimensions often interact, they are analytically distinct: a polity may enjoy broad international recognition yet experience ontological insecurity or remain internationally unrecognized while achieving ontological reassurance through other forms of relational validation. The empirical cases therefore capture variation along this dimension: Northern Cyprus and Abkhazia illustrate limited international recognition, whereas the CoFA states show that ontological insecurity may persist despite full international recognition.

In his analysis of small states in international politics, Keohane (1969) famously compared them to Lilliputians confronting the Gullivers of the international system. If the Lilliputians can tie up Gulliver, he argued, “they must be studied as carefully as the giant.” This dissertation follows that invitation by examining dependent polities—political entities defined less by size than by persistent dependence—as actors that exercise meaningful political action within hierarchical structures of international politics. By focusing on elite behavior in patron–client relations, the study seeks a holistic understanding of international hierarchy from its marginal and least visible units. It argues that these Lilliputian entities should be understood not merely as subjects of hierarchy but also as participants in its reproduction and evolution through their strategic, identity-driven, and emotionally mediated practices of adaptation and resistance. In doing so, the dissertation extends existing scholarship by integrating insights on hierarchy, client actorness, and ontological security into a common analytical framework for understanding strategic behavior under asymmetry.

The overarching research question that animates this dissertation is: *How do client states navigate asymmetric relationships under conditions of ontological insecurity, and what strategies emerge across different PCR contexts?* It reflects a comparative ambition, enabling variation in the forms of asymmetry, affectivity, and strategic response across distinct geopolitical constellations. Rather than reducing client behavior to a single strategic logic, existing scholarship has identified a range of adaptive responses to asymmetry. Building on these insights, this dissertation develops the concept of elite navigation as an analytical framework for capturing the strategic repertoire of client state actors as they manage the tension between structural asymmetry and identity preservation, emphasizing how historical ties, perceived (dis)respect, and concerns about domestic and international legitimacy shape strategic conduct. The sub-question—*How do*

material dependence and affective ties interact to shape elite navigation?—guides the analysis of variation across cases and serves to link ontological security theory with a core dimension of PCRs, namely affectivity. This framework allows the dissertation to account for both persistent structural constraints and dynamic forms of client strategy. By embedding case-specific findings within this broader conceptual frame, the synthesis chapter aims to clarify how ontological insecurity operates as a mediating force in PCRs and to contribute to the refinement of strategic behavior typologies in international relations.

Existing approaches to PCRs have each illuminated critical aspects of asymmetric dependence (Kolstø & Blakkisrud, 2017; Kolstø, 2020, 2021, 2024; Berg & Vits, 2020; Biermann, 2025; Blakkisrud et al., 2025; Palani, 2025; Vits, 2025), but they rarely intersect in a way that explains how such relationships endure outside conflict or coercion. PCR scholarship has traditionally emphasized material asymmetry, reciprocity, and hierarchy (Lemarchand & Legg, 1972; Eisenstadt & Roniger, 1980; Landé, 1983; Shoemaker & Spanier, 1984), focusing on how resources and obligations flow between dominant and subordinate actors, while more recent studies have increasingly examined client actorness and the internal dynamics of dependent polities (e.g., Gerrits & Bader, 2016; Kolstø, 2020; Blakkisrud et al., 2025; Biermann, 2025). As Biermann (2025, p. 20) observes, however, “the literature hardly debates client motives,” and he consequently calls for scholarship to “shift from the usual patron-privileging to a more interactive approach” that takes seriously the “distinct motives, preferences and strategies of secessionists” (Biermann, 2025, p. 23). Building on this emerging research agenda, the present dissertation examines how dependent entities interpret and navigate asymmetry through concerns of dignity, respect, and ontological security, thereby integrating affective and interpretive dimensions into the analysis of patron–client relations. OST, by contrast, provides insight into how actors seek continuity and recognition to sustain a stable sense of Self (Mitzen, 2006; Steele, 2008; Rumelili, 2014; Carlà & Prina, 2025), but it lacks a clear account of how identity concerns are negotiated through power asymmetries. The two research strands therefore leave a shared conceptual space for examining how affective expectations such as respect, recognition, and trust shape compliance and strategic conduct within durable, peaceful hierarchies.

This dissertation addresses that gap through the framework of elite navigations, which conceptualizes how political elites in dependent polities mediate asymmetry through affectively informed strategic behavior. Although *de facto* states have often been portrayed, particularly in academic and policy discourse, as instruments or proxies of their patrons (Cornell & Starr, 2009; Asmus, 2010; Souleimanov et al., 2018; see also Kolstø, 2020), more recent scholarship has increasingly emphasized client actorness and the strategic autonomy of dependent polities. Building on this growing body of scholarship, this framework identifies five recurrent modes of navigation—defiance, demanding, dictation (Berg & Yüksel, 2022), conformation (Yüksel & Berg, 2024), and calibration (Yüksel, 2025)—through which elites pursue ontological security under structural dependence. Across these modes, affectivity is perceived through respect and recognition. The

dissertation conceptualizes elite navigations as an analytical mechanism linking asymmetrical structure with identity-based strategic self-positioning, thereby bridging PCR's material logic and OST's focus on the continuity of the Self. In doing so, it contributes to a closer analytical dialogue between the two research strands and provides a comparative tool for examining how asymmetrical hierarchies are stabilized or transformed through elite practice.

A final analytical choice concerns the focus of the dissertation. This study adopts a client-centered perspective, treating patron behavior primarily as the structural context within which client elites operate. The analytical emphasis therefore falls on how dependent polities interpret and navigate asymmetrical relationships.

A related analytical position has to do with the level of analysis adopted in this dissertation. The primary object of inquiry is the strategic behavior of political elites, as it is elite actors who negotiate, interpret, and implement patron–client relations. This focus should not be understood as implying that elites operate independently of society. Rather, elite navigation is embedded in domestic political contexts in which governing actors seek to maintain legitimacy, respond to public expectations, and manage intra-elite competition. This dynamic is evident across all three empirical cases. In Northern Cyprus, elite strategies are shaped by electoral politics and party competition; in Abkhazia, public backlash and opposition surrounding the Pitsunda agreement constrained elite decision-making; and in the CoFA states, negotiations with the United States were closely intertwined with concerns about domestic legitimacy and public acceptance of the Compact arrangements. The dissertation therefore conceptualizes elite navigation as the process through which domestic political and identity concerns are translated into strategic conduct within asymmetric patron–client relationships.

The empirical foundation of this dissertation rests on three separate studies: Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC), Abkhazia (ABH), and the Compact of Free Association (CoFA) states—specifically, the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI), and the Republic of Palau (PW). Each represents a distinctive configuration of PCRs and ontological (in)security, selected to capture variation in recognition status, relational structures, and client strategy. Northern Cyprus and Abkhazia are *de facto* states whose political survival depends on asymmetric ties with a single external patron. Northern Cyprus exemplifies a case of strong affective attachment and extensive ties to Turkish political and administrative structures. Abkhazia, while similarly dependent, operates within a less affective and more transactional relationship with Russia, where ontological insecurity is heightened by sovereignty disputes and contested territorial arrangements. The CoFA states, by contrast, are internationally recognized microstates engaged in formalized, treaty-based relations with the United States. Here, PCRs are structured but non-coercive, and client strategies are shaped more by concerns about autonomy and respect than by existential threats. Taken together, these cases provide a basis for comparing how client states manage asymmetry across divergent institutional and geopolitical contexts while enabling refinement of the theoretical framework through concepts such as recognition, layered affectivity, respect, and calibration. The analysis

throughout adopts a non-normative, analytical perspective on these relationships, focusing on strategic behavior rather than legal status or recognition claims.

The decision to follow an article-based format reflects both practical and intellectual considerations. The three peer-reviewed articles that form its core were developed over a sustained period of research and publication, during which each contribution incrementally extended the project's theoretical scope and empirical reach. Rather than treating the articles as discrete outputs, the dissertation positions them as parts of a cumulative inquiry into the dynamics of elite navigations within asymmetric relationships. The first article introduced a foundational framework for analyzing elite navigations in PCRs through the lens of ontological security, using Northern Cyprus as a case (Berg & Yüksel, 2022). The second article added the case of Abkhazia and deepened the comparative logic while refining the typology of client strategies (Yüksel & Berg, 2024). The third article expanded the framework further by theorizing affectivity through the concept of respect and introducing calibration as a distinct mode of client behavior, based on the CoFA cases (Yüksel, 2025). Together, the three studies demonstrate how asymmetric relationships are shaped by evolving pressures and anxieties across geopolitical and institutional settings. The article-based format thus enables both theoretical refinement and case-specific depth. This introductory chapter integrates their findings and develops cross-case comparisons.

The remainder of this chapter is structured to synthesize the core conceptual and empirical contributions of the three articles. Section 2 presents the theoretical framework, outlining key dimensions of PCRs—particularly asymmetry, reciprocity, affectivity, durability, and compliance—and linking them to OST and the proposed concept of elite navigations. Section 3 restates the overarching research questions and provides a consolidated discussion of the methodological choices across the three studies, including case selection, epistemological positioning, and data sources. Section 4 summarizes the articles individually, emphasizing their findings and theoretical contributions. Section 5 offers a comparative synthesis of the cases, identifying patterns, divergences, and refinements in client strategy across contexts. This includes a focused discussion of how respect, recognition, and structural constraints interact to shape asymmetric relationships. Section 6 concludes by drawing out broader implications for PCR literature, the dynamics of client strategy under asymmetry, and the application of ontological (in)security in dependent polity contexts. Together, these sections integrate the three articles into a cohesive analytical contribution.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This section outlines the theoretical framework that underpins the dissertation's analysis of client strategy in asymmetric political relationships. It brings together two research strands—patron–client relations and ontological security theory—to provide a dual lens through which to examine how client states respond to internal and external pressure and manage dependence. PCR research provides the structural vocabulary for analyzing these relationships, particularly asymmetry, reciprocity, and durability. Ontological security theory, together with the concept of respect (R. Wolf, 2011), helps account for the social-symbolic dimensions of client strategy—namely, how affectivity and compliance emerge from the interplay of structural conditions and identity-based anxieties. Throughout this dissertation, PCR is treated as a research tradition comprising multiple conceptual approaches rather than a single unified theory. The dissertation therefore develops an analytical framework that synthesizes insights from the PCR literature with OST. The framework thus combines material asymmetry with relational insecurity, taking seriously both the realist underpinnings of PCRs and the socially constructed nature of political behavior. The section proceeds in three stages. First, it introduces the core dimensions of PCRs as used in this dissertation. Second, it outlines how ontological insecurity functions as a condition of political action under asymmetry. Third, it presents the concept of *elite navigations* as a framework for analyzing strategic responses to patronal pressure. The aim is to clarify how client behavior is shaped not only by power asymmetries, but also by evolving anxieties over recognition, legitimacy, and respect.

2.1. Patron–Client Relations: Structure, Debate, and Relational Limits

2.1.1. Classical Foundations and Conceptual Core of PCRs

Originating in anthropological analyses of kinship and tribal exchange systems, the concept of PCRs was developed to explain how hierarchy, reciprocity, and obligation structure social and political interaction (Eisenstadt & Roniger, 1984; Efrat & Bercovitch, 1991). Over time, the research migrated from anthropology and comparative politics into international relations (IR), where it was adapted to describe asymmetric inter-state relationships built on the exchange of security guarantees, economic aid, and diplomatic recognition (Carney, 1989; Veenendaal, 2017; Biermann, 2025; Caspersen & Guedet, 2025). Early IR applications often emphasized the informal and exchange-based character of these relationships, while subsequent scholarship has highlighted their durability, routinization, and institutionalization across both formal and informal settings (Biermann, 2025; Brucker, 2025). Core features of PCRs include asymmetry, the structural inequality that defines the exchange; reciprocity, or the mutual yet unequal obligations that sustain it; durability, the endurance of dependence through path-dependent

commitments; compliance, the patterned expectation that clients accommodate patron preferences; and affectivity, the emotional-symbolic layer that binds the relationship and reinforces loyalty or resentment (Carney, 1989; Veenendaal, 2017).

From its earliest anthropological formulations, patron–client relations were understood to involve more than transactional exchange. Eisenstadt and Roniger (1984) emphasized that such relations structured not only the flow of resources but also patterns of legitimacy and obligation embedded in social order. Similarly, Lemarchand and Legg (1972) described affectivity as the primary social adhesive binding patrons and clients, highlighting loyalty, solidarity, and moral indebtedness as constitutive elements of hierarchical ties. Powell (1970) and Scott (1972) likewise underscored the role of reciprocity and obligation in sustaining asymmetric exchange, noting that compliance rested not merely on material inducement but on enduring bonds characterized by trust, proximity, and diffuse expectations. Across these foundational accounts, affectivity was not peripheral; it explained why highly unequal relationships could endure without constant coercion.

Carney’s (1989) adaptation of patron–client relations to international politics marked a significant step toward conceptual formalization. By identifying asymmetry, reciprocity, affectivity, and compliance as constitutive features, he preserved the anthropological insight that hierarchical ties cannot be reduced to material exchange alone. In this formulation, affectivity was identified as a constitutive feature, but its specific role in shaping interpretation, contestation, and strategic recalibration remained less fully specified. Compliance, in turn, was primarily interpreted as a rational or strategic response to asymmetry rather than as a relational outcome shaped by perceived dignity, recognition, or moral reciprocity.

This tension—between acknowledging affectivity as constitutive and leaving its strategic implications less fully specified—appears across several strands of PCR scholarship. Foundational authors recognized that hierarchical exchange is sustained through more than coercion or incentive, while the theoretical vocabulary for capturing how affect mediates obligation and contestation remains open to further development. This dissertation builds on these insights by examining affectivity as an interpretive medium through which hierarchy is experienced, legitimized, contested, and enacted.

Affectivity, as conceptualized here, is analytically distinct from legitimacy and recognition, though it intersects with both. Legitimacy refers to the normative justification of authority; recognition refers to the acknowledgment of status or standing within a relational hierarchy. Affectivity instead captures the emotional and symbolic texture through which legitimacy and recognition are experienced. It concerns how hierarchical relations are felt—whether as respectful, humiliating, protective, or patronizing—and how these affective interpretations condition the political meaning of asymmetry. In this sense, affectivity is not reducible to institutional endorsement or formal status; it is the relational atmosphere that mediates how structural inequality becomes tolerable, resented, or strategically

navigated. Affectivity therefore refers not to discrete emotions but to patterned emotional expectations embedded within hierarchical roles.

Contemporary PCR scholarship reflects a growing tension between these approaches. On the one hand, materialist and contractual accounts continue to conceptualize compliance as a rational response to asymmetry, emphasizing bargaining power, enforcement capacity, and cost–benefit calculations (Shoemaker & Spanier, 1984; Lake, 2011). On the other hand, a relational turn has reintroduced attention to legitimacy, moral obligation, and symbolic authority, arguing that hierarchy is sustained not only through resources but through perceptions of fairness, benevolence, and recognition (Eisenstadt & Roniger, 1984; Hutchison & Bleiker, 2014). Even within this relational literature, however, affectivity is more often acknowledged as part of the background texture of hierarchy than systematically specified as an analytical category through which client elites interpret and act upon asymmetry. It is therefore frequently treated as a contextual condition accompanying stability or breakdown rather than as a constitutive mechanism shaping how asymmetry is interpreted and enacted by client elites.

The materialist strand tends to conceptualize hierarchy as a problem of enforcement and incentives. Compliance is explained through leverage, exit costs, and patronal capacity to sanction defection. In such accounts, asymmetry is primarily distributive: it concerns the allocation of resources and coercive tools. By contrast, relational approaches conceptualize hierarchy as a social order sustained through normative expectations and shared understandings. Here, asymmetry is not merely a distribution of capabilities but a patterned relationship in which roles, identities, and expectations are reproduced over time. The divergence between these strands is partly methodological and partly analytical: it reflects different assumptions about whether hierarchy is best examined primarily as a problem of coercion and incentives or as a relational order sustained through roles, expectations, and recognition. The present dissertation builds on relational accounts by further specifying the affective mechanisms through which hierarchical roles are internalized, contested, or reinterpreted.

Taken together, the constitutive features define patron–client relations not merely as unequal exchanges, but as structured relational orders. Asymmetry establishes the unequal distribution of capabilities and dependence; reciprocity specifies the expectations of exchange that stabilize the relationship despite inequality; and compliance captures the patterned accommodation of patronal preferences that hierarchy presumes. Compliance, as understood in this dissertation, denotes patterned accommodation through which client actors maintain the relationship while continuing to negotiate, contest, and shape its terms. Durability refers not only to the persistence of dependence over time, but to the survival of the relationship across electoral cycles, leadership turnover, and regime change. Within this dissertation, a relationship is treated as a patron–client relation when it endures political transition and becomes embedded beyond individual governments or policy episodes. These elements describe the structural

grammar of PCRs (Eisenstadt & Roniger, 1984; Carney, 1989; Lake, 2011; Biermann, 2025).

Building on this framework, the dissertation treats affectivity as an interpretive medium through which asymmetry, reciprocity, and compliance acquire political meaning. Whether hierarchy is experienced as respectful, fair, or degrading shapes how clients legitimize, contest, or recalibrate the relationship.

2.1.2. From Materialist Hierarchy to the Relational Turn

Early examples of PCR scholarship in international relations largely reflected realist and dependency-oriented thinking, conceptualizing asymmetric relations as hierarchical bargains sustained through material incentives and coercive leverage (Shoemaker and Spanier 1984). Patrons were assumed to provide indispensable goods—security, aid, diplomatic protection—while clients offered loyalty, strategic access, or compliance. This transactional view emphasized the stability of dependence but placed comparatively less emphasis on the interpretive dimension of these relationships: how clients understood their own subordination, negotiated symbolic standing, or experienced the moral economy of exchange. Later works, such as those by Carney (1989) sought to formalize PCRs as systems of contractual hierarchy, distinguishing between voluntary and coercive forms of alignment. Yet even these accounts primarily framed compliance as a rational response to asymmetry rather than a relational outcome shaped by identity and recognition.

The endurance of patron–client relations suggests that purely instrumental explanations, while indispensable, do not by themselves capture all of the dynamics that sustain durable asymmetric relationships. Wolf’s (1966) notion of “lopsided friendship” captures the paradox of asymmetric ties: rather than becoming more fragile as inequality deepens, such relationships often grow more stable. Lemarchand and Legg (1972) similarly observed that the intensification of obligation can reinforce rather than weaken alignment. These insights suggest that hierarchy is sustained not only through resource dependence but also through affective normalization—the internalization of unequal exchange as legitimate or even desirable. While these authors recognized the emotional bonds between patrons and clients, the present dissertation builds on these insights by examining how such affective ties vary across cases and how changes in respect and recognition shape processes of elite navigation and strategic recalibration.

More recent scholarship has served to expand PCR research beyond its materialist core to include the social and affective mechanisms that sustain or destabilize asymmetric ties (Carney, 1989; Lake, 2011). Studies of aid politics, peacekeeping, and alliance management have shown that perceptions of fairness, legitimacy, and moral debt play a crucial role in maintaining compliance and cooperation (Hutchison & Bleiker, 2014). Patrons derive authority not only from material superiority but from the capacity to elicit deference through recognition and respect—what anthropologists have long described as the affective glue of hierarchy (Eisenstadt and Roniger 1984). The emerging “relational turn” in PCR

scholarship provides a more differentiated framework for understanding the diverse strategic practices through which client elites negotiate autonomy, legitimacy, and recognition within asymmetric relationships. It foregrounds the interpretive capacity for maneuver of weaker actors who navigate dependence by appealing to norms of dignity, procedural fairness, or moral reciprocity.

Taken together, these interventions—ranging from Lake’s (2011) theorization of hierarchy as relational authority, to constructivist engagements with patron–client dynamics (Carney, 1989), to affect-oriented analyses of legitimacy and emotional politics in international relations (Hutchison & Bleiker, 2014)—signal an emerging shift in the field. Rather than treating hierarchy as a distributive arrangement sustained through incentives and coercion alone, this literature increasingly conceptualizes asymmetric cooperation as embedded within normative expectations, symbolic recognition, and relational evaluation. Although not always framed explicitly as a unified “relational turn,” these contributions extend PCR tradition beyond a strictly materialist understanding of dependence. This relational understanding lays the groundwork for the dissertation’s central claim: that affectivity—expressed and perceived through respect and recognition—transforms structural inequality into a field of strategic negotiation in which structural dependence and elite actorness interact to shape political outcomes.

Recent efforts to systematize PCRs in secessionist conflict, most notably Biermann (2025), represent an important step toward conceptual consolidation. Biermann identifies cooperative resource exchange, asymmetric power dependence, diffuse obligation, and durability as constitutive features of patron–client relations, arguing that secessionist PCRs form a distinct subtype within broader hierarchical politics. This clarification strengthens the analytical grammar of PCRs and moves the field beyond intuitive usage. While diffuse obligation acknowledges moral or normative expectations embedded in exchange, the framework is primarily structural in orientation. It leaves open the questions of how obligations are interpreted, experienced, or contested by client elites, and how symbolic expectations shape the stability of hierarchy. In this respect, the affective dynamics of obligation remain open to further conceptual specification. Obligation is identified, but its emotional content—whether experienced as respect, humiliation, gratitude, or resentment—is not systematically unpacked.

Moreover, recent work on civil society patronage (Brucker 2025) demonstrates that patron–client dynamics extend beyond interstate relations to include transnational advocacy networks and non-state actors. While expanding the universe of patrons enriches the framework, it also reinforces the need to clarify how symbolic endorsement, public recognition, and moral support function within hierarchical ties. Material exchange alone cannot explain the durability of such relationships; symbolic validation and perceived respect play an equally central role.

This dissertation builds directly on three strands of scholarship: classical anthropological formulations that conceptualize patron–client ties as morally embedded hierarchies (Lemarchand & Legg, 1972; Eisenstadt & Roniger, 1984);

institutional accounts of hierarchy and authority in international relations (Carney, 1989; Lake, 2011; Biermann, 2025); and recent empirical studies of client maneuverability in de facto state contexts (Kosienkowski, 2019; Kolstø, 2020; Palani, 2025; Caspersen & Gueudet, 2025). It extends this emerging relational strand within PCR scholarship—encompassing relational hierarchy theory (Lake, 2011), constructivist engagements with patron–client dynamics (Carney, 1989), affect-oriented analyses of legitimacy (Hutchison & Bleiker, 2014), and empirical studies foregrounding renegotiation and crisis dynamics (Kolstø, 2020; Palani, 2025; Caspersen & Gueudet, 2025)—by conceptualizing affectivity not simply as a descriptive attribute of hierarchy but as a constitutive interpretive medium shaping how asymmetry is politically enacted.

Across the cases examined, affectivity is perceived through respect and recognition, shaping compliance and contestation alike. The dissertation’s theoretical contribution lies in conceptualizing elite navigations—the repertoire of strategic responses through which political elites interpret and manage dependence under affective and structural constraint. This framework explains forms of strategic recalibration that classical PCR accounts struggle to theorize: instances in which client elites contest patronal behavior, renegotiate symbolic standing, or engage in selective defiance without exiting the hierarchical relationship. Materialist models tend to frame outcomes in terms of compliance, bargaining, or exit; they offer limited tools for explaining calibrated maneuverability within durable asymmetry. Drawing on anthropological accounts of obligation and reciprocity, institutional theories of hierarchy and durability, and ontological security theory’s focus on recognition and identity continuity, the study reconceptualizes asymmetric cooperation as a relational order sustained through both material exchange and symbolic acknowledgment.

2.1.3. Analytical Gaps: Affectivity, Client Interpretation, and Identity

The limitations of existing PCR scholarship can be grouped into three interrelated but analytically distinct gaps: a conceptual gap concerning the theorization of affectivity, a methodological gap privileging patronal structure over client interpretation, and an ontological gap concerning the identity stakes of hierarchical subordination. The first concerns how affectivity is defined and theorized within PCR frameworks; the second concerns whether explanation proceeds primarily from patronal design or client interpretation; and the third concerns whether subordination is treated as a functional arrangement of exchange or as a condition implicating identity, dignity, and self-understanding.

Despite important advances in conceptual consolidation and empirical refinement, affectivity remains insufficiently integrated into the analysis of compliance and contestation. Much of the literature acknowledges loyalty, trust, gratitude, resentment, respect, and recognition as factors that stabilize or strain asymmetric ties, yet these dimensions are often treated as contextual features of

durable hierarchy rather than as mechanisms through which actors interpret and manage asymmetry (Carney, 1989; Lake, 2011; Hutchison & Bleiker, 2014; Biermann, 2025; Caspersen & Gueudet, 2025). This is particularly consequential in peaceful and durable patron–client relations, where compliance cannot be explained solely through coercion or material dependence (Carney, 1989; Wolf, 2004; Lake, 2011; Biermann, 2025). In such contexts, affective expectations concerning respect, recognition, and moral reciprocity shape how asymmetry is experienced, legitimized, reproduced, negotiated, or challenged (Gerrits & Bader, 2016; Kosienkowski, 2019; Kolstø, 2020; Blakkisrud et al., 2025). Addressing this gap involves complementing existing approaches by conceptualizing affectivity as a relational medium through which power, obligation, and legitimacy are interpreted by client elites.

Empirical research on *de facto* states has increasingly challenged portrayals of clients as passive recipients of patronal control. Studies of Abkhazia (Kolstø, 2020), Transnistria (Kosienkowski, 2019), and Iraqi Kurdistan (Palani, 2025) demonstrate that even highly dependent entities engage in strategic defiance, obstruction, and balancing. Caspersen and Gueudet (2025) further show that patron–client crises may generate renegotiated hierarchies rather than collapse, revealing opportunities for client action even under conditions of recognition deficit. These contributions significantly advance the field by foregrounding client maneuverability and crisis dynamics. However, while actorness is increasingly documented, the interpretive foundations of the phenomenon remain under-theorized. While client resistance, renegotiation, and balancing are well documented, we know less about how elites interpret asymmetry as acceptable or degrading, protective or suffocating. Client maneuverability is empirically visible, but the affective triggers that activate it remain analytically implicit.

What unites these empirical studies is their demonstration that dependence does not eliminate maneuverability. Yet they differ in how they conceptualize the sources of variation. Some attribute divergence in client behavior to structural conditions such as multi-patron environments or degrees of economic penetration. Others emphasize institutional autonomy or leadership strategies. Whether external involvement is perceived as protective solidarity or intrusive domination, benevolent guardianship or humiliating oversight, conditions how structural constraints are translated into political strategy. Without incorporating this interpretive layer, variation risks being explained through exogenous contextual factors rather than through relational dynamics internal to hierarchy itself.

A second analytical characteristic of much PCR scholarship is its tendency to focus on the structure and management of hierarchical relationships and, consequently, on patronal behavior (Lake, 2011; Gerrits & Bader, 2016; Blakkisrud et al., 2025; Biermann, 2025). Even when asymmetry is acknowledged as relational rather than merely material, analysis often proceeds from the perspective of how patrons design, manage, or stabilize hierarchical arrangements. This orientation reflects the research questions that have traditionally guided the field and has generated important insights into the logic of patronal influence. The dissertation deliberately adopts a client-centered analytical perspective, examining how elites

interpret their position within asymmetric relationships and translate these interpretations into strategic practices of elite navigation.

Recent work has also examined how recognition and patron penetration shape hierarchical depth. Blakkisrud et al. (2025) investigate whether formal recognition increases executive and military penetration by patrons, while Gerrits and Bader (2016) conceptualize Russian involvement through linkage and leverage. Kosienkowski and Ženková Rudincová (2024) expand the typology by introducing quasi-patrons, demonstrating variation in external support structures. These studies refine our understanding of institutional embeddedness and structural dependence. Yet they primarily measure penetration, leverage, and formal control mechanisms. Less attention is paid to how recognition—or its absence—affects elite perceptions of dignity, status, and relational standing. Recognition is treated as institutional fact rather than symbolic resource. As a result, the emotional and identity-based consequences of hierarchical incorporation remain undertheorized.

This structural emphasis leaves comparatively less room for the everyday interpretive labor through which client elites make sense of dependence and decide how to act within it. Clients do not respond mechanically to material incentives or institutional constraints; they evaluate patronal behavior through relational cues—signals of respect, neglect, inclusion, or marginalization—that shape their understanding of what the relationship permits or demands. By focusing predominantly on formalized obligations, measurable penetration, and observable patterns of exchange, much of the literature explains variation in terms of structural depth, degrees of leverage, or institutional embedding (Lake, 2011; Gerrits & Bader, 2016; Blakkisrud et al., 2025; Biermann, 2025). While such accounts illuminate how hierarchy is organized and maintained, they are less well suited to explaining why similar configurations of dependence can generate divergent strategic responses across cases. Variation in client behavior is therefore frequently attributed to structural conditions such as multi-patron environments, degrees of economic penetration, leadership strategies, or crisis dynamics (Kosienkowski, 2019; Kolstø, 2020; Palani, 2025; Caspersen & Gueudet, 2025), rather than theorized as a systematic outcome of how elites interpret the symbolic meaning of patronal conduct. Bringing client meaning-making to the center of analysis is therefore essential for explaining why hierarchical relations endure, adapt, or become sites of strategic contestation even in the absence of overt coercion.

A third and closely related limitation of existing PCR literature concerns the relatively limited systematic engagement with questions of identity, dignity, and ontological security. While issues of recognition and status surface in studies of renegotiation and patronal penetration (Kosienkowski & Ženková Rudincová, 2024; Blakkisrud et al., 2025; Caspersen & Gueudet, 2025), they are less frequently theorized as constitutive dimensions of hierarchical order in their own right. While hierarchy is often treated as a functional arrangement sustained through exchange and obligation, less attention is paid to how subordination is experienced as a condition that implicates self-understanding and political legitimacy. Client states are typically analyzed in terms of the resources they provide or receive—

security guarantees, economic transfers, diplomatic backing, or strategic access—and the degree of institutional penetration or leverage exercised by the patron (Carney, 1989; Lake, 2011; Gerrits & Bader, 2016; Biermann, 2025; Blakkisrud et al., 2025) rather than how dependence affects their ability to sustain coherent identity narratives or perform statehood in ways they regard as legitimate. As a result, the emotional and symbolic stakes of hierarchy—feelings of respect, humiliation, recognition, or neglect—remain open to further theoretical development.

This lacuna becomes particularly visible in contexts of contested sovereignty. For de facto states, hierarchical alignment with a patron is not merely a matter of resource acquisition; it implicates claims to statehood, autonomy, and international standing. Patronal behavior can affirm or undermine the client's narrative of sovereign selfhood. When alignment is experienced as respectful partnership, hierarchy may be reconciled with identity continuity. When it is experienced as status degradation or symbolic subordination, the same structural arrangement can generate ontological anxiety. By neglecting these identity-inflected experiences of hierarchy, PCR tradition risks treating subordination as politically neutral rather than as a condition laden with symbolic consequence.

This omission is consequential because hierarchical relationships are not merely material arrangements; they are also sites where status is conferred, denied, or contested. For client actors, the capacity to maintain dignity within dependence is often as politically salient as securing material benefits. When patronal behavior undermines recognition or constrains identity-consistent action, ontological insecurity emerges—not as an abstract psychological state, but as a practical political problem that demands strategic response. Yet although recent studies engage questions of recognition and status—particularly in analyses of renegotiation and patron penetration (Kosienkowski & Ženková Rudincová, 2024; Blakkisrud et al., 2025; Caspersen & Gueudet, 2025)—PCR scholarship has only recently begun to treat identity-based anxieties as constitutive dimensions of hierarchy itself. These studies document status tensions and recognition dynamics, but they do not systematically explore how threats to identity continuity generate strategic recalibration within durable asymmetry. By integrating ontological security theory into the analysis of PCRs, this dissertation foregrounds dignity and identity preservation as central mechanisms through which asymmetry is navigated. In doing so, it offers a complementary perspective that conceptualizes hierarchical relations as affectively charged environments that reconcile material dependence with the need for recognition and self-continuity.

This relational logic can be further understood through Tönnies' classic distinction between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*. PCRs occupy an ambiguous position between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*—between affective community and instrumental society (Tönnies, 2001). In their early anthropological formulations, PCRs resembled *Gemeinschaft*: sustained by loyalty, obligation, and mutual recognition. As they became formalized within the state system, they acquired *Gesellschaft*-like features—structured by contracts, institutions, and rational exchange. Yet the residues of *Gemeinschaft* persist even in institutionalized

settings: respect, trust, and moral reciprocity continue to shape how asymmetry is legitimized and sustained. This dual character explains the endurance of PCRs even when material incentives decline; they are held together by emotional as well as strategic bonds. The *Gemeinschaft*–*Gesellschaft* tension also clarifies why affective expectations do not disappear under institutionalization. Even when relations are formalized through treaties, aid agreements, or security arrangements, actors continue to evaluate them through community-like standards of loyalty, fairness, and mutual recognition. Institutional rationalization does not eliminate emotional evaluation; it reframes it. The endurance of PCRs across political transition thus depends not only on contractual stability but on the maintenance of affective legitimacy within hierarchical roles. This distinction is not introduced as an alternative theory of PCRs, but as a sociological lens that clarifies their hybrid relational logic. Recognizing this sociological tension clarifies why affectivity cannot be dismissed as secondary—it is integral to the relational logic that gives hierarchy meaning. The interplay of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* thus provides the sociological foundation for this dissertation’s synthesis of structure and emotion, showing how community-like bonds persist within the rationalized hierarchies of international society.

In this sense, patron–client relations can be understood as relational micro-sites in which broader hierarchies of international politics are enacted and reproduced. Rather than treating hierarchy as an abstract structural condition, the PCR lens captures how asymmetry is lived, negotiated, and stabilized through concrete patterns of exchange, obligation, and affective expectation. Through asymmetric but durable ties, PCRs normalize dependence via narratives of protection and reciprocity, while channeling resistance into morally intelligible forms of deference or contestation. This relational perspective reveals hierarchy not as a fixed architecture imposed from above, but as an evolving social process sustained through everyday practices of recognition, loyalty, and restraint between patrons and clients.

Yet while this relational reconstruction clarifies how hierarchy is stabilized and contested through affective interpretation, it does not fully explain why certain forms of symbolic affirmation or degradation generate strategic recalibration, whereas others are absorbed without rupture. To account for these dynamics, it becomes necessary to move beyond patron–client perspective alone and engage a framework capable of theorizing identity continuity, recognition, and the management of existential insecurity. It is at this juncture that ontological security theory becomes analytically indispensable.

2.2. Ontological Security Theory

2.2.1. Foundations and Core Concepts of OST

OST offers a complementary framework for understanding how client states navigate asymmetry by focusing on identity, continuity, and the emotional dimensions of international politics. Rooted in the psychological work of Laing (1969), sociological work of Giddens (1991) and later adapted for IR by Mitzen (2006) and Steele (2008), OST posits that political actors seek not only physical security, but also the preservation of a stable sense of self. Subsequent scholarship refined these foundational insights by clarifying that ontological security is not reducible to subjective belief but is sustained through social interaction and intersubjective validation. Zarakol (2010) demonstrates how states experience ontological insecurity through status denial and historical stigma, while Subotić (2016) shows how narrative repair becomes central to foreign policy behavior when identity coherence is threatened. Together, these interventions establish that ontological security is deeply embedded in social recognition and collective memory, rather than merely internal psychological stability.

For states, this entails maintaining routines, narratives, and recognition that reinforce identity coherence over time. In PCRs, where structural dependence often comes with external interference, ontological insecurity arises when these routines are disrupted, identities are questioned, or recognition is withheld. Crucially, ontological (in)security also depends on whether client states are able to self-realize—that is, to pursue goals that are meaningful within their identity framework (Browning & Joenniemi, 2017). When structural asymmetry prevents this, it creates a gap between identity and action, deepening the sense of insecurity—a dynamic long identified in ontological security scholarship as a key driver of compensatory political behavior (Kinnvall, 2004). Later work extends this insight by emphasizing crisis and community reconstitution. Kinnvall and Mitzen (2018) argue that moments of ontological rupture provoke fundamental questioning of identity and belonging, while Ejodus (2018) conceptualizes such disruptions as “critical situations” that expose the fragility of narrative continuity. These contributions highlight that ontological insecurity does not merely generate anxiety; it catalyzes strategic practices aimed at restoring narrative coherence, moral standing, and relational recognition.

This dissertation thus conceptualizes ontological insecurity not only as a condition of misrecognition or instability, but also as a failure of identity-affirming self-realization. Rather than focusing on powerful states, this study uses OST to analyze the strategic anxieties of dependent or contested polities as they respond to perceived threats to identity, recognition, or self-realization. In doing so, it moves beyond compliance as a rational-material calculation and examines how affective conditions—particularly the search for recognition, respect, and goal realization—mediate client responses. This interpretive layer helps explain why structurally similar PCRs can produce divergent strategies, depending on how client actors internalize and navigate their position.

While ontological security theory is often presented as a coherent framework, the literature contains important internal distinctions that bear directly on its application to asymmetric relationships. Mitzen's (2006) original formulation emphasizes the stabilizing function of routines, arguing that states may become attached even to conflictual relationships because they provide predictable role reproduction and narrative continuity. In this view, ontological security is secured through habitual interaction, and anxiety emerges primarily when routines are disrupted. Steele (2008), by contrast, foregrounds the moral dimension of identity, arguing that states seek to sustain a positive self-narrative and may accept material costs in order to avoid shame, guilt, or moral dissonance. Ontological insecurity, here, arises less from routine disruption per se than from threats to moral self-understanding.

Subsequent interventions have further expanded the concept: Zarakol (2010) demonstrates how stigma and status hierarchies produce ontological insecurity through processes of denial and historical narrative repair, while Ejodus (2018) conceptualizes "critical situations" as moments when fundamental identity questions are reopened and routine continuity collapses. Kinnvall and Mitzen (2018) likewise highlight that crises do not merely interrupt stability but can reconstitute community boundaries and intensify identity-driven responses. Taken together, these strands reveal that ontological insecurity may stem from disrupted routines, moral dissonance, stigmatization, or critical questioning of identity itself. For client states operating within patron–client relations, these mechanisms can overlap: structural dependence may simultaneously destabilize routines, challenge moral self-perception, and expose actors to status-based stigma. Recognizing these internal variations within OST clarifies that ontological insecurity in asymmetric contexts cannot be reduced to a single trigger; rather, it emerges from the interaction between continuity, morality, and hierarchical recognition.

2.2.2. Relational and Multilevel Dimensions of Ontological Security

At the heart of ontological security theory is the notion that political actors seek continuity in the self through stable patterns of behavior and recognition (Giddens, 1991; Mitzen, 2006; Steele, 2008; Kinnvall & Mitzen, 2017). For states, this continuity is sustained through routines that affirm role identities, narratives that render political action coherent, and relational contexts that validate their self-understanding. Mitzen (2018) further develops this relational dimension by demonstrating how "feeling at home" within institutional or regional environments contributes to ontological stability. Similarly, Rumelili (2014; 2015) shows that even peacebuilding processes can destabilize actors when they unsettle established identity narratives. These studies underscore that ontological security is maintained not only through behavioral repetition but through ongoing relational affirmation. Disruption to any of these elements—whether through shifts in patronal expectations, changes in international status, or internal fragmentation—can generate ontological insecurity (Mitzen, 2006; Steele, 2008; Zarakol, 2010;

Ejdus, 2018; Kinnvall & Mitzen, 2018). These disruptions are particularly acute for client states, whose structural subordination makes them vulnerable not only to external demands but also to symbolic destabilization. For such actors, the challenge is not only to maintain sovereignty or autonomy, but to remain legible and legitimate within the narratives that define their political Self. The inability to perform expected roles or achieve identity-consistent goals can produce a rupture in narrative coherence, leading to a strategic search for compensatory action.

These dynamics are especially pronounced in PCRs, where material dependence intersects with affective expectations and symbolic asymmetries. Understanding client behavior, therefore, requires attention not only to structural conditions but also to how elites interpret shifts in recognition, respect, and status through the lens of identity preservation. These ontological anxieties, however, are not confined to internal disruptions or patronal interference; they are shaped by how others perceive and respond to the patron–client relationship itself, situating OST within a broader social field of recognition and judgment (Kinnvall & Mitzen, 2017; Mitzen, 2018).

Ontological insecurity also emerges from the external social environment in which client states are embedded. Because identity is sustained through mutual recognition, threats to ontological security often arise not solely from within the patron–client dyad but from how others perceive and categorize the relationship itself. Dependent polities risk being seen by third parties as subordinate, coerced, or illegitimate, judgments that challenge their self-conception as autonomous political actors (Mattern & Zarakol, 2016). Chernobrov (2016) further demonstrates that public misrecognition—particularly when amplified through international discourse—can produce ontological anxiety by destabilizing the perceived legitimacy of political communities. Such dynamics are especially acute for entities whose sovereignty is contested, as their claims to autonomous selfhood are continuously evaluated by external audiences.

Ontological security in asymmetric relationships operates across three analytically distinct but mutually reinforcing levels. First, it concerns intra-elite narrative coherence: the extent to which governing actors can sustain a stable story about who “we” are and what we are doing. Second, it concerns dyadic recognition within the patron–client relationship itself, where symbolic affirmation or degradation shapes the interpretation of asymmetry. Third, it concerns systemic positioning within the broader international order, where external audiences categorize, validate, or stigmatize dependent actors. These levels interact: dyadic disrespect may reverberate into systemic delegitimation, while systemic stigma may intensify sensitivity within the dyad. Conceptualizing ontological security across levels clarifies that insecurity is not located in one site but emerges through layered relational processes.

Such perceptions can erode both internal legitimacy and external status, particularly when the patron’s dominance becomes a visible marker of dependency. In regional or multilateral arenas, these reputational hierarchies can be especially destabilizing: client states may feel compelled to overperform independence or loyalty to counter external skepticism, while patrons may leverage the relation-

ship's visibility to project influence. The result is a layered insecurity—one that extends beyond the dyad into a broader social field of observation, judgment, and status comparison.

Recent scholarship has further emphasized that ontological security is not simply maintained through internal narrative coherence but is co-constituted through circulations of affect within broader social and political environments. Solomon (2018) demonstrates that affect travels through public discourse, media representation, and collective memory, shaping how insecurity is experienced and politically mobilized. Similarly, Chernobrov (2016) shows that public misrecognition and symbolic marginalization can destabilize state identity by disrupting the feedback loop between self-understanding and external acknowledgment. Subotić (2016) highlights the role of narrative contestation in mediating how states reconcile past actions with present identity claims, underscoring that ontological security is always embedded in relational storytelling. Rumelili (2014; 2015) further illustrates that conflict resolution processes can unintentionally generate insecurity when identity narratives are unsettled without providing alternative sources of recognition. These insights are particularly relevant for client states, whose identities are not only negotiated within the patron–client dyad but also scrutinized by regional audiences, international institutions, and rival actors. Shani (2017) and Vieira (2016) extend this relational view by demonstrating how ontological security is entangled with postcolonial hierarchies and status struggles, while Zarakol (2017) reminds us that international order itself is structured through historically sedimented hierarchies that shape which identities are validated and which are stigmatized. In asymmetric relationships, therefore, ontological insecurity is not confined to routine disruption or moral dissonance; it is produced through layered processes of observation, categorization, and affective circulation across the international system. For client states embedded in patronal hierarchies, the “gaze” of others can amplify insecurities already present within the dyad, intensifying the political significance of recognition and respect.

Importantly, this external dimension of ontological insecurity reinforces the political significance of mutual respect within the patron–client relationship itself. When respect is consistently expressed and perceived within the dyad, it provides not only internal ontological stability but also external legitimacy, signaling to others that the relationship is grounded in recognition rather than domination. In this sense, what this dissertation terms affective reciprocity—the mutually perceived exchange of respect, recognition, and symbolic acknowledgment within the dyad—can serve as a buffer against externally imposed narratives of dependency, enabling client states to sustain a coherent identity amid the gaze of a hierarchical international society. This multilevel logic resonates with Solomon's (2018) argument that affect circulates within and across political communities, shaping how insecurity is experienced and politicized. Ontological security, therefore, cannot be reduced to dyadic interaction alone; it is embedded within broader affective economies that structure recognition, stigma, and reassurance.

2.2.3. Debates and Limits in OST

While ontological security theory has proven influential in explaining state behavior driven by identity continuity, it has also generated important debates regarding its scope and limits. Much of the foundational OST literature has examined relatively powerful or institutionally consolidated states—such as the United States, European Union member states, or historically stigmatized but sovereign powers—analyzing how routinized foreign policy practices, narrative repair, and role identities stabilize behavior over time (Mitzen, 2006; Steele, 2008; Zarakol, 2010; Mitzen, 2018; Rumelili, 2014). This emphasis has produced valuable insights into why states sometimes pursue seemingly costly or counter-productive strategies in order to preserve a coherent sense of Self. At the same time, critical engagements have warned against conceptual overreach. Rossdale (2015) cautions that ontological security risks becoming a catch-all explanation if not tied to clearly specified mechanisms, while Croft and Vaughan-Williams (2017) call for greater methodological precision in operationalizing insecurity. These critiques reinforce the need to identify how ontological strain emerges from concrete relational practices rather than being inferred from outcomes. At the same time, it has left less explored how ontological security operates under conditions of structural dependence, where actors possess limited control over routines, constrained room for narrative projection, and reduced capacity for self-realization. In such contexts, the sources of insecurity are not only internal disruptions or identity crises, but externally imposed constraints on recognition, autonomy, and meaningful political action.

Moreover, early formulations of OST tended to conceptualize anxiety primarily as an internal experience of routine disruption or moral dissonance (Mitzen, 2006; Steele, 2008), framing insecurity as cognitive or narrative instability rather than as a condition produced through unequal relational interaction. Although later scholarship has foregrounded affect more explicitly (Kinnvall, 2004; 2017), the mechanisms through which emotions such as humiliation, reassurance, or resentment emerge within structured hierarchies remain comparatively under-developed. As a consequence, while OST has richly theorized anxiety, stigma, and narrative repair (Zarakol, 2010; Ejodus, 2018), it has offered fewer systematic accounts of how emotions such as humiliation, reassurance, or resentment are generated within ongoing asymmetric relationships and translated into patterned strategic responses. Existing studies tend to analyze crisis episodes, status denial, or narrative disruption, but rarely examine how structured inequality itself produces recurring affective dynamics over time (Chernobrov, 2016; Solomon, 2018). Addressing these limitations requires situating ontological security within relational structures of power and hierarchy and treating affect not as a background state but as a socially mediated process embedded in unequal interaction.

These debates intersect with broader critical reflections within ontological security scholarship itself. Rossdale (2015) cautions that OST can risk enclosing critique by re-centering order and continuity as normative goods, potentially obscuring the emancipatory potential of rupture and transformation. Croft and

Vaughan-Williams (2017) similarly argue that OST must clarify its analytical boundaries and avoid conceptual overstretch, particularly when extending beyond its original focus on routinized identity reproduction. Ejodus (2018) refines the framework by distinguishing between ordinary insecurity and “critical situations” in which fundamental questions about identity are reopened, emphasizing that not all disruptions generate the same ontological stakes. Mitzen (2018) and Kinnvall (2017) further foreground the affective dimensions of belonging, trauma, and exclusion, demonstrating that ontological security is deeply entangled with emotional governance and the politics of community. Kinnvall and Mitzen (2018) extend this insight to conflict dynamics, showing how communities may cling to rigid identity narratives under perceived threat, even when such narratives reproduce insecurity. Taken together, these interventions underscore that ontological security is neither a static psychological condition nor an automatic product of routine. It is contested, political, and embedded in power relations. For client states operating within hierarchical structures, this insight is crucial: ontological security cannot be assumed as a byproduct of stable patronal alignment, nor can insecurity be reduced to internal narrative dissonance. It must be analyzed as a relational phenomenon shaped by unequal structures of authority, public recognition, and affective circulation.

A further line of critique argues that ontological security scholarship risks pathologizing insecurity and implicitly privileging stability over transformation. Rossdale (2015) warns that by centering the preservation of narrative continuity, OST can inadvertently reproduce conservative political logics, treating rupture as dysfunction rather than as a site of contestation. Similarly, Croft and Vaughan-Williams (2017) argue that without clearer methodological anchors, ontological security may be retroactively inferred from foreign policy outcomes. These critiques are particularly salient in hierarchical contexts, where insecurity may be structurally produced rather than psychologically generated. By embedding ontological security within patron–client hierarchies, this dissertation avoids treating anxiety as a purely internal condition and instead locates it within patterned asymmetry. Insecurity is not read as deviance from stability, but as a relational outcome of unequal recognition structures. This shift reframes ontological strain as politically productive rather than pathologically aberrant.

2.2.4. Ontological Security Under Structural Asymmetry

The intersection of PCRs and OST provides a conceptual foundation for analyzing how client states navigate asymmetric relationships. While PCRs establish the material and institutional contours of dependence—emphasizing asymmetry, reciprocity, durability, and the expectation of compliance—they offer limited insight into how clients experience and respond to the symbolic dimensions of subordination. OST, by contrast, centers on the need for actors to sustain a consistent sense of self through continuity, recognition, and the avoidance of existential anxiety (Giddens 1991; Mitzen 2006; Steele 2008; Kinnvall and Mitzen 2017). Yet, despite its emphasis on emotional stability, many applications

of OST primarily examine affect as a consequence of narrative or psychological processes rather than as a relationally produced condition within hierarchical interaction. The present dissertation extends these insights by examining how affective perception—the way actors interpret respect, recognition, and procedural fairness—functions as the mediating link through which identity continuity is negotiated under structural constraint. By situating affect within relational hierarchy, this study departs from applications that treat insecurity primarily as narrative inconsistency or routine disruption. Instead, it conceptualizes ontological (in)security as emerging through patterned interaction within asymmetric relationships—where recognition, procedural fairness, and symbolic standing are continuously negotiated.

The dissertation does not assume that ontological insecurity substitutes for physical insecurity. Instead, it argues that the two interact. Limited international recognition often heightens physical insecurity by creating uncertainty regarding external protection and legal status, while simultaneously reinforcing ontological insecurity through contested identity and legitimacy. Conversely, internationally recognized microstates may enjoy greater legal security but still experience ontological insecurity arising from asymmetric dependence, perceived disrespect, or threats to autonomy.

Recent developments in ontological security theory also highlight that the quest for security is not limited to preserving the past but extends to realizing self-consistent goals and projecting identity into the future (Browning and Joenniemi 2017). This projective dimension complicates earlier routine-centered accounts. This distinction invites a more precise differentiation between continuity-oriented and projective forms of ontological security. Continuity-oriented security is achieved through the repetition of familiar roles, narratives, and relational routines that stabilize identity over time. Projective security, by contrast, depends on the capacity to enact future-oriented goals that affirm an actor's sense of purpose and actorness. While major powers often possess the structural latitude to reconcile these dimensions—maintaining stable routines while projecting ambitious identity-consistent futures—dependent actors face a sharper tension between them. In asymmetric relationships, continuity may be preserved through stable patronal alignment, yet projective aspirations—such as enhanced autonomy, international recognition, or expanded diplomatic capacity—can be structurally constrained. This generates what may be termed projective blockage: a condition in which identity-consistent futures cannot be meaningfully pursued despite routine stability. For client states, ontological insecurity may therefore arise not only from disruption but from stagnation—from the perception that structural dependence forecloses identity-affirming trajectories. This dynamic differs fundamentally from the ontological dilemmas of major powers, where insecurity often stems from overextension or identity inconsistency rather than from restricted horizon of action. By foregrounding projective blockage as a distinctive mechanism of insecurity in asymmetric relations, this dissertation extends OST beyond its traditional focus on routine disruption and demonstrates how structural hierarchy conditions the future-oriented dimension of identity continuity.

This differentiation also clarifies an important theoretical move in this dissertation: ontological insecurity in asymmetric relationships is not treated as episodic crisis alone, but as structurally patterned vulnerability. Whereas much of the OST literature focuses on rupture—moments when routines collapse or identity narratives fracture—hierarchical dependence may generate a slower, more chronic form of ontological strain. This strain emerges not from sudden breakdown but from sustained exposure to unequal recognition structures. Dependent actors may experience recurring micro-disruptions: symbolic slights, procedural exclusion, delayed consultation, or public misattribution of responsibility. Individually, such incidents may appear minor; cumulatively, they can erode the sense that identity is affirmed within the relationship.

In this sense, ontological insecurity in PCRs often operates below the threshold of open crisis. It is sedimented in everyday interaction. The instability lies not in dramatic rupture but in the gradual accumulation of affective dissonance. By shifting attention from extraordinary disruption to patterned asymmetry in recognition practices, this dissertation extends OST into the terrain of durable hierarchy. Ontological strain becomes intelligible not only as a reaction to shock, but as a response to structured inequality in symbolic standing.

If ontological security depends not only on repetition but on the capacity to enact identity-consistent futures, then structural constraint becomes a potential source of insecurity even in the absence of overt disruption. Dependent actors may maintain stable routines yet experience ontological strain when their ability to pursue meaningful goals is curtailed. From this perspective, ontological security entails not only the maintenance of narrative stability but also the pursuit of actions that confirm a sense of actorness and purpose. In asymmetric relationships, these two dimensions—continuity and projectivity—are often in tension: clients seek to maintain recognition within existing hierarchies while also advancing self-defined aims that may challenge those hierarchies. It is this tension between maintaining identity stability and enacting identity-confirming actorness that gives rise to affectivity as a mediating force—an emotional register through which actors experience, interpret, and respond to ontological strain.

In this framework, affectivity emerges from ontological security's internal logic: actors seek not only predictable behavior from others but also confirmation of their Self – worth and moral standing. When such recognition is inconsistent or withheld, ontological insecurity is not merely cognitive but deeply affective—it is felt as disrespect or humiliation. Zarakol (2010; 2017) demonstrates that humiliation and stigma can generate persistent insecurity that shapes foreign policy behavior across decades. In hierarchical relationships, such experiences are not episodic but potentially routinized, rendering affect a structured feature of asymmetric interaction rather than an accidental byproduct.

In asymmetrical relationships, where status and autonomy are inherently uneven, affectivity therefore becomes the medium through which ontological security is either restored or disrupted. While structural asymmetry generates vulnerability, the perception of respect can stabilize dependence by validating identity; conversely, perceived disrespect destabilizes it by undermining

ontological continuity. This insight points toward the need for a framework capable of capturing how actors translate affective insecurity into patterned strategic practice under conditions of structural constraint.

While affectivity provides the emotional medium through which ontological (in)security is experienced, its concrete expression in state-level relationships requires further conceptual specification. Different affective registers—such as trust, loyalty, gratitude, or resentment—may become salient depending on the structure of the relationship and the forms of interaction it sustains. Among the various affective registers that shape political behavior—trust, loyalty, gratitude, and resentment—the dissertation argues that respect emerges as the most salient in asymmetric interstate relations. Unlike interpersonal affect, which can be anchored in intimacy or shared identity, the affective life of states is mediated through symbolic gestures, diplomatic rituals, and procedural consistency. Within the framework developed here, respect functions as the primary relational currency through which identity recognition and ontological stability are negotiated within patron–client relationships. In contrast with generalized trust or loyalty, respect is particularly well suited to asymmetric interstate relations because it acknowledges hierarchy while affirming dignity. It allows inequality to persist without necessarily destabilizing identity. In this sense, respect bridges PCR and OST: it translates structural asymmetry into ontological reassurance—or, when absent, into ontological strain that demands strategic recalibration.

2.3. Synthesis of Patron–Client Relations and Ontological Security Theory

At the point of synthesis, affectivity functions as the central analytical bridge between patron–client relations and ontological security theory. While PCR research specifies the structural conditions of asymmetry, reciprocity, and durability, and OST explains why actors seek continuity, recognition, and meaningful action, affectivity captures how these structural and identity-based pressures are experienced, interpreted, and acted upon. In this sense, affectivity is not merely an accompanying feature of patron–client relations but a constitutive dimension of their operation: durable asymmetry is sustained not only through material exchange and institutionalized compliance, but through affective interpretations that render hierarchy legitimate, tolerable, or contestable. Patron–client relations endure not only through material exchange and institutionalized compliance but also because they are lived and negotiated through affective expectations such as respect, recognition, and moral reciprocity.

This understanding reframes affectivity from a descriptive backdrop into a relational medium through which hierarchy acquires political meaning. It is through affective interpretation that asymmetry becomes either stabilizing or destabilizing, enabling client elites to assess whether dependence affirms dignity or undermines identity. Affectivity thus provides the connective tissue between structural asymmetry and strategic conduct, linking the material grammar of

patron–client relations to the identity concerns emphasized in ontological security theory.

Neither patron–client relations nor ontological security theory alone can fully explain how client states navigate durable asymmetry. This synthesis also clarifies why the concepts of respect and elite navigations became analytically indispensable in the course of this research. PCR tradition identifies affectivity as constitutive of hierarchical exchange, yet leaves it underspecified as a mechanism. Ontological security theory foregrounds recognition and identity continuity, yet does not fully explain how these concerns operate under durable structural asymmetry. Respect emerges at the intersection of these traditions as an operationalizable affective condition: it translates PCR’s diffuse notion of affectivity and OST’s concern with recognition into a concrete interpretive signal through which elites evaluate hierarchy. Respect is selected not because other affects are absent, but because it best translates hierarchical dignity claims into observable practice. It captures when asymmetry is experienced as dignified partnership and when it is perceived as degrading subordination. Elite navigations provide the behavioral counterpart to this interpretive mechanism. If respect structures perception, elite navigations structure response. Together, they transform the synthesis of PCR and OST from a theoretical juxtaposition into an analytical framework capable of tracing how structural constraint becomes affective experience and how affective experience becomes patterned strategic practice. Elite navigations thus emerge from this synthesis as the strategic practices through which client elites manage the tension between structural dependence (PCR) and identity continuity (OST), mediated by affective perceptions of respect.

2.3.1. Role of Respect

Within this framework, respect is conceptualized as the affective condition through which client actors interpret and respond to structural asymmetry. Its inclusion follows directly from ontological security theory’s dual concern with recognition and projective capacity. Actors seek not only continuity of the Self but also the ability to pursue self-defined goals that affirm their identity. When recognition is withheld or inconsistently conveyed, ontological insecurity manifests as experienced misrecognition—a perception that one’s identity or standing is not properly acknowledged. Respect thus emerges not as a normative ideal but as an analytical indicator of whether asymmetry affirms or undermines identity and role legitimacy within the relationship.

Beyond its psychological dimension, respect operates performatively within international hierarchies (Wolf, 2011). It is enacted through diplomatic language, procedural inclusion, symbolic gestures, and public acknowledgment (Lebow, 2008; Pouliot, 2016). Practices such as inclusive consultation, ceremonial parity, or public validation signal recognition and reinforce ontological stability. Conversely, exclusion, patronizing discourse, or unilateral decision-making communicate diminished standing. For dependent polities, such signals shape whether hierarchy is experienced as dignified partnership or degrading

subordination. Respect is therefore not merely felt; it is enacted, interpreted, and negotiated in practice.

Respect functions as the interpretive filter (Mitzen, 2006) through which client elites evaluate patronal conduct. Its presence confirms recognition and reinforces the perceived capacity for meaningful political action; its absence generates anxiety and prompts strategic recalibration. In state-level hierarchies, where affectivity is mediated through institutional and symbolic interaction rather than interpersonal intimacy (Eisenstadt & Roniger, 1984; Lake, 2011), respect becomes the principal affective signal structuring perception. It operates as a proxy for recognition and reciprocal standing (Lebow, 2008; Adler-Nissen, 2014). When respect is perceived as threatened or withdrawn, elites respond not by abandoning hierarchy, but by adjusting their mode of engagement within it. The patterned forms such adjustments take are conceptualized as elite navigations in the following section.

2.3.2. Elite Navigations

The concept of elite navigations captures a specific form of political practice exercised by governing elites in dependent polities: the ongoing management of asymmetric relationships under conditions of structural constraint and affective uncertainty. Rather than treating client behavior primarily as episodic decision-making or isolated deviation from hierarchy, elite navigation is understood as a relational practice through which elites continually reimagine their positioning vis-à-vis a patron in order to preserve legitimacy, identity coherence, and political maneuverability. Navigation does not imply movement toward autonomy; it denotes situated steering within hierarchy—adjusting tone, claims, and alignment in response to shifting expectations of recognition and respect.

This framework draws on three strands of scholarship. First, work on small-state politics demonstrates how structurally weaker actors exercise influence through selective assertion, norm-based claims, and strategic adaptation rather than material power (Browning, 2006; Ingebritsen, 2002; Thorhallsson, 2012). Second, relational approaches to hierarchy show that asymmetry structures the conditions under which autonomy can be enacted and acknowledged (Lake, 2011; Koga, 2018). Third, elite-centered studies of patron–client relations emphasize the mediating role of political intermediaries who interpret and negotiate asymmetrical ties (Boissevain, 1969). Elite navigations synthesize these insights by conceptualizing actorness not as independence from hierarchy, but as meaningful political action exercised within it.

Elite navigations are neither purely instrumental strategies nor simple expressions of compliance or resistance. They describe how elites interpret patronal conduct through the lens of respect, assess the relational climate of the dyad, and translate these interpretations into patterned political practice. By foregrounding affective evaluation, the framework specifies how identity concerns become operationalized as strategic adjustment. It extends earlier work on elite brokerage and strategic adaptation (George, 1994; Kuus, 2013) by

showing that mediation under asymmetry is structured not only by material constraint, but by perceptions of recognition, inclusion, and standing.

Importantly, elite navigations are not isolated acts but recurrent modes of engagement embedded in durable relationships. They develop through repeated interaction and shared expectations about acceptable conduct within hierarchy. Rather than focusing on discrete moments of choice, the framework emphasizes continuity, reimagining, and relational learning (Pouliot, 2016; Bicchi & Bremberg, 2018). What distinguishes elite navigations is their grounding in affective interpretation: elites respond not only to material incentives or institutional rules, but to perceived shifts in respect and recognition.

By conceptualizing elite navigations as a repertoire of relational practices, the framework captures how ontological insecurity is politically managed under asymmetry. Elites do not simply accept or reject hierarchy; they modulate engagement in ways that seek to stabilize identity while sustaining material ties. Client behavior thus appears not as passive adaptation or open defiance, but as patterned adjustment within constraint. The following section develops a typology of elite navigations, identifying distinct modes through which these practices take institutional and discursive form.

2.3.3. Elite Navigation Strategies

The comparative analysis identifies five recurrent modes of elite navigation that structure client responses within patron–client hierarchies. These strategies do not represent fixed categories but ideal-typical patterns that capture how dependent elites manage the tension between structural constraint and identity preservation. Each strategy reflects a distinct configuration of affective interpretation, material dependence, and symbolic positioning within the dyad.

Defiance and dictation represent the assertive end of the elite navigations spectrum. Defiance denotes a mode of action in which client elites openly resist patronal influence to protect identity-defining boundaries or principles. It expresses a refusal to internalize subordination and affirms symbolic autonomy within structural dependence. Dictation, by contrast, involves efforts to shape or constrain the patron’s conduct, thereby reversing the expected direction of influence. Whereas defiance emphasizes negation, dictation seeks redefinition—using available leverage, legitimacy, or moral authority to steer the relationship toward more acceptable terms. Together, these two modes capture how elite behavior can become assertive when structural asymmetry is perceived to threaten ontological stability or recognition.

Demand and conformation occupy the middle ground between resistance and accommodation. Demand entails the articulation of expectations framed as reciprocal obligations within the patron–client relationship. It functions as a claim to moral or contractual balance when elites perceive inconsistency between the patron’s actions and the normative basis of the relationship. Conformation, in turn, refers to selective alignment with patronal preferences to sustain continuity, security, or legitimacy. It represents accommodation without full submission—

an adjustment that maintains stability under constraint. These modes illustrate how client actors navigate ontological insecurity when respect or recognition appears recoverable but uncertain, opting for strategies that reaffirm order while preserving interpretive actorness.

Calibration represents a distinct, adaptive mode within elite navigations. It operates through strategic ambiguity—signaling dissatisfaction, recalibrating tone or engagement, and asserting autonomy without overt rupture. Rather than opposing or yielding, calibration occupies an intermediate space of managed unease, allowing elites to communicate misalignment while maintaining cooperation. It relies on subtle adjustments in language, timing, and diplomatic posture that restore relational equilibrium under asymmetry. As a theoretical construct, calibration demonstrates that client behavior can manifest through affectively charged yet materially cautious actions, linking symbolic recognition to pragmatic restraint.

Taken together, defiance, dictation, demand, conformation, and calibration form a typology of elite navigations that conceptualizes the range of strategic responses available to client actors in asymmetrical relationships. The typology captures both the structural and affective dimensions of actorness. PCR scholarship provides the grammar of dependence and reciprocity, while ontological security theory explains how identity-related concerns transform structural pressure into strategic action. By synthesizing these research strands, the concept of elite navigations reframes client behavior not as deviation from hierarchy, but as a patterned and relational practice of managing recognition, respect, and existential stability within enduring asymmetry.

These insights establish the relational and affective foundations upon which strategic behavior unfolds. Respect, as the interpretive core of affectivity, shapes how elites perceive asymmetry, while elite navigations capture how these perceptions are enacted through concrete political practice. By linking emotion to strategy and recognition to action, the framework translates ontological security from a condition of identity maintenance into an analytical lens for understanding client actorness under asymmetry. This conceptual synthesis bridges perception and practice, laying the groundwork for the analytical framework developed and operationalized in the empirical chapters that follow.

The typology of elite navigations developed above provides the analytical foundation for the empirical inquiry that follows. By integrating the structural insights of PCR tradition with the interpretive sensitivity of ontological security theory, the framework identifies how client elites perceive, negotiate, and act within asymmetric relationships. It translates abstract dimensions of asymmetry, reciprocity, and affectivity into observable practices—discursive positioning, negotiation behavior, and symbolic signaling—that can be systematically analyzed across cases. The following section outlines the methodological logic underpinning this analysis, including the criteria for case selection, the comparative strategy linking the three Compact of Free Association states, and the interpretive approach used to infer elite motivations and perceptions from documentary and discursive evidence.

3. METHODOLOGY

This research addresses the overarching research question: How do client states navigate asymmetric relationships under conditions of ontological insecurity, and what strategies emerge across different patron–client contexts? The accompanying sub-question asks how material dependence and affective ties interact to shape elite navigation. To answer these questions, the dissertation adopts a comparative, article-based research strategy that brings together three theoretically connected case studies. Each article examines a different empirical manifestation of elite navigation under conditions of structural asymmetry and contributes to the development of a common analytical framework. The research strategy combines abductive reasoning with iterative case comparison. Rather than testing deterministic causal hypotheses, it moves between conceptual development and empirical interpretation to identify recurring patterns of behavior across structurally similar yet affectively distinct patron–client relationships. The analytical goal is not statistical generalization but mid-range theorization.

The methodological approach is qualitative and interpretive, combining close textual analysis of political discourse, official statements, legal documents, media sources, and secondary literature. Where available, elite interviews and public communications are used to trace how political actors articulate identity claims, respond to patronal expectations, and frame strategic choices. Particular attention is paid to moments of crisis, transition, or symbolic tension—points at which elite navigations become most visible and ontological insecurity surfaces most clearly. These discursive markers are treated not as transparent reflections of belief, but as situated performances through which elites manage external pressure, preserve legitimacy, and assert relational positioning under asymmetry.

The interpretive strategy is informed by constructivist traditions in international relations and situated within the growing literature on PCRs. Political strategy is understood not as a set of objectively measurable inputs and outputs, but as relational practice emerging from the interplay between material constraints and elite interpretations of recognition, respect, and legitimacy. While the findings are not statistically generalizable, this approach enables a richer understanding of how meaning is constructed and how asymmetry is experienced and navigated in practice. Structural conditions—military assistance, economic dependence, diplomatic insulation—are not dismissed but integrated into a dual-layered framework that combines realist sensitivities with constructivist insight.

Conceptually, the dissertation focuses on politically organized jurisdictions operating under structural dependence. Rather than treating legal recognition as the primary dividing line, it examines dependency as the defining condition shaping elite behavior. In this respect, the study engages scholarship on small dependent jurisdictions (Comai, 2018), which highlights how various non-sovereign or partially sovereign entities operate within asymmetric external relationships.

However, Comai's (2018) formulation primarily addresses small jurisdictions whose dependency stems from constitutional or territorial subordination within larger state structures, often including *de facto* states and non-self-governing territories. While analytically valuable, this category does not fully capture the cross-status variation central to this dissertation. The present study therefore adopts the term dependent polities as a broader classificatory device, encompassing both *de facto* states and internationally recognized microstates embedded in structurally asymmetric patron–client arrangements.

The term is used descriptively rather than normatively. It identifies entities whose external autonomy and security are structurally conditioned by a dominant external actor, regardless of formal recognition status. By foregrounding dependency rather than legal status, the dissertation enables comparison across cases that would otherwise be analytically separated: partially recognized *de facto* states and fully recognized microstates. Recognition is treated as a variable shaping how dependence is experienced and negotiated, not as a categorical boundary.

Within this category of dependent polities, the dissertation examines Northern Cyprus, Abkhazia, and the Compact of Free Association states—the Federated States of Micronesia, the Republic of the Marshall Islands, and the Republic of Palau. *De facto* states are understood as entities exercising internal sovereignty without broad external recognition (Geldenhuys, 2009; Caspersen, 2013; Toomla, 2016; Pegg, 2019; Kursani, 2021). Their survival and external interaction depend heavily on patron support, making PCRs not merely strategic options but structural conditions of existence. As such, they represent analytically prototypical cases of dependency under ontological and material vulnerability.

The CoFA states present a contrasting configuration. Although fully recognized sovereign UN members, they operate within treaty-based but deeply asymmetric relationships with the United States. These arrangements entail extensive reliance in areas such as security provision, external representation, and economic support. Despite differences in legal status, both *de facto* states and CoFA microstates exhibit limited strategic autonomy, reliance on a dominant partner, and heightened sensitivity to recognition and symbolic standing. This structural similarity underpins their analytical comparability. The object of comparison is therefore not the cases themselves but the mechanism through which structural dependence shapes elite strategic behavior. Variation in legal status, patron identity, and institutional arrangements serves to test whether similar navigational logics emerge across otherwise diverse patron–client relationships.

The cases were selected to maximize variation in recognition status, relational formality, and affective structure, while maintaining comparability as structurally dependent entities. TRNC represents a high-affect bilateral PCR with Turkey. Abkhazia reflects a more ambiguous and transactional dynamic with Russia. The CoFA states illustrate treaty-based but individually negotiated patron–client arrangements with the United States. Together, these cases allow the study to trace how differences in legal status and relational institutionalization shape the experience and management of ontological insecurity.

The dissertation adopts a mechanism-oriented comparative strategy that examines how elite navigation operates across diverse patron–client relationships. Northern Cyprus, Abkhazia, and the CoFA states differ in recognition status, patron state, geographical setting, and institutional form, yet all exhibit durable dependence on a dominant external actor. This shared condition provides the basis for comparison and allows the study to examine whether similar mechanisms of elite navigation emerge across different empirical settings.

The comparative logic is cumulative and theory-building rather than parallel or confirmatory. The empirical investigations are treated as sequential stages in an evolving analytical framework, with each study refining and extending concepts developed in the preceding one. New dimensions—such as conformation, respect, and calibration—emerged through iterative engagement with the empirical material and were incorporated into the framework as recurring patterns became visible across cases. This abductive orientation allows theoretical propositions to develop through interpretive engagement with patterned variation across patron–client relationships. While the dissertation adopts an interpretive and abductive orientation, the identification of elite navigations follows a structured analytical logic. Strategic categories—defiance, demand, dictation, conformation, and calibration—are not inferred from isolated rhetorical statements but derived from patterned alignment between discourse, institutional positioning, and observable shifts in relational behavior.

The analytical task is therefore to trace how elites articulate and enact responses to patronal expectations across temporally bounded episodes of tension, negotiation, or repositioning. The dissertation treats patronal expectations as the structural and relational context within which client elites interpret recognition, negotiate autonomy, and formulate strategic responses.

Elite navigations are identified through three interconnected indicators. First, discursive positioning: how elites publicly frame their relationship with the patron, including references to respect, recognition, autonomy, obligation, or grievance. Particular attention is paid to the language of red lines, conditional cooperation, moral entitlement, or procedural fairness. These discursive elements are treated as interpretive signals through which elites communicate relational expectations and justify strategic choices.

Second, institutional or policy adjustment: whether rhetorical positioning is accompanied by observable changes in voting behavior, treaty negotiation, legislative acts, public protests supported or resisted by governing elites, diplomatic signaling, or shifts in compliance patterns. This allows the analysis to distinguish between symbolic rhetoric and meaningful repositioning within the patron–client relationship.

Third, relational repositioning over time: whether elite responses produce sustained shifts in the pattern of interaction or remain episodic. Calibration, for instance, is distinguished from defiance not merely by tone but by the maintenance of structural alignment combined with subtle symbolic assertion. Similarly, conformation is identified not as passive obedience but as negotiated accommodation in which elites secure recognition or material assurances in exchange for alignment.

The navigation strategies should be understood as analytical categories rather than mutually exclusive empirical types. Classification is based on the dominant strategic orientation exhibited by elites toward the patron in a particular episode. Strategies are distinguished according to whether elites primarily resist patron preferences (defiance), seek concessions (demanding), attempt to shape patron behavior (dictation), accommodate patron expectations (conformation), or carefully adjust their position while preserving the relationship (calibration). Because empirical episodes may display elements of more than one strategy, classification follows the predominant orientation evident in elite discourse and political practice.

The empirical analysis draws on multiple qualitative sources collected across the three studies, including semi-structured elite interviews, official government documents, parliamentary debates, policy papers, media reports, and secondary scholarly literature. These materials were collected from publicly available government archives, official institutional websites, parliamentary records, established national and international media outlets, and, where applicable, through the author's own fieldwork and semi-structured elite interviews conducted during the respective research projects. The combination of these sources enables triangulation between elite narratives, institutional practices, and public political discourse, thereby strengthening the validity of the comparative analysis. The aim is not to access the subjective beliefs of individual actors, but to interpret publicly performed strategic positioning within a relational field structured by asymmetry. In this sense, elite discourse is approached as political action rather than as transparent access to internal motivation.

The abductive reasoning process unfolds iteratively. Initial observations of divergence prompted refinement of the typology; subsequent cases were analyzed with increasing conceptual precision. When new patterns—such as calibration or the role of respect—emerged, they were incorporated into the framework only after demonstrating recurrence across contexts. This iterative logic guards against premature theoretical closure while maintaining analytical coherence.

Finally, scope discipline is maintained by restricting claims to durable and institutionalized patron–client relations. The framework is not designed to explain short-term alliances, highly fragmented multi-patron environments, or collapsing state structures. It is most applicable to cases where asymmetric dependence is sustained over time and where relational expectations are sufficiently routinized to generate patterned affective responses. By specifying these conditions, the dissertation clarifies the analytical boundaries within which elite navigations can be meaningfully identified. Alternative explanations grounded solely in material interests, bargaining power, or institutional dependence account for important aspects of patron–client relations but do not by themselves explain the observed variation among structurally comparable relationships. The integration of ontological security theory allows the dissertation to account for how identity, recognition, and perceived respect mediate elite responses to dependence. The added value of this perspective lies not in replacing material explanations but in

explaining why comparable structural conditions may generate different strategic outcomes.

Through this layered design, the dissertation develops an integrated framework in which theoretical propositions emerge through interpretive engagement with patterned variation across structurally comparable PCRs. The result is a dynamic analytical framework grounded in existing scholarship on patron–client relations and ontological security that seeks to extend their analytical dialogue through a mechanism-oriented account of elite navigation. Building on growing scholarship emphasizing client actorness, the framework demonstrates how political elites strategically translate structural dependence into relational practices aimed at preserving autonomy, legitimacy, and ontological security.

4. FROM PATRON-CLIENT RELATIONS TO ELITE NAVIGATIONS: LINKING THE KNOWN AND THE UNKNOWN

The three articles that constitute the core of this dissertation form a cumulative inquiry into how client state elites navigate asymmetric relationships under affective and ontological pressure. The first article (Berg & Yüksel 2022) introduces the framework of elite navigations, theorizing how client actors in de facto states employ strategies of defiance, demanding, and dictation to manage dependence while preserving ontological security. It also establishes affectivity as a key analytical dimension, showing that recognition and emotional reciprocity shape compliance alongside material exchange. The second article (Yüksel & Berg 2024) deepens this framework by adding conformation as a fourth navigational mode and linking affectivity more explicitly to ontological security theory, emphasizing how recognition and misrecognition influence strategic adaptation. The third article (Yüksel 2025) extends the analysis to formally sovereign microstates, adding calibration as a fifth mode and developing respect as the primary affective mechanism that mediates recognition, identity, and compliance within enduring asymmetry. Together, these studies advance a unified theoretical contribution: that client behavior in patron-client relations emerges through elite navigations—strategic, affectively informed practices that reconcile structural dependence with the pursuit of ontological security.

The starting point for this cumulative inquiry lay in the existing scholarship: PCR tradition offered a structural grammar of dependence and exchange, while OST illuminated the psychological and narrative dimensions of identity continuity. Yet, despite their respective strengths, these literatures are rarely intersected. PCR analyses tended to treat loyalty and compliance as outcomes of material leverage or institutional embeddedness, while OST studies largely focused on powerful states and the anxieties of autonomy rather than dependence. These literatures leave room for a more explicit relational account of how identity security operates within structured asymmetry—how the emotional life of hierarchy translates into strategic behavior. The first article began precisely at this junction. It reinterpreted the classical features of PCR—asymmetry, reciprocity, and compliance—through an affective lens, showing that dependence is not merely endured but continually negotiated through expectations of recognition and dignity. In doing so, it operationalized affectivity as a theoretical bridge between structure and identity, revealing that elite strategic conduct under hierarchy cannot be captured solely by rationalist or institutionalist models. Instead, it demonstrated that the concept of elite navigations does not explain static positions on a continuum of power but maps out the relational expressions of how clients experience anxiety and misrecognition. This initial step transformed the “known knowns” of PCR and OST into a shared conceptual field, establishing affectivity as the interpretive mechanism that links material subordination to the pursuit of ontological security.

As the framework was tested and refined through the second article, the research confronted the “known unknowns” that emerged from applying affectivity and ontological security to new empirical terrain. The initial framework assumed that affective ties, once established, could be analytically read as stabilizing or destabilizing forces within hierarchical relationships. Yet, the PCR in Abkhazia case revealed a more intricate reality: affectivity could sustain hierarchy even when accompanied by frustration, resentment, or partial misrecognition. The relationship between Russia and Abkhazia showed that dependence does not always generate defiance or disengagement; it can also produce accommodation strategies that preserve ontological coherence under constraint. This finding required a conceptual addition. The introduction of *conformation* as a fourth mode of elite navigation recognized that clients often operate within the gray zone between resistance and compliance. Conformation is not a sign of passivity, but an identity-preserving adaptation—a strategic effort to secure dignity within unavoidable dependence. This empirical insight deepened the theoretical understanding of affectivity as ambivalent rather than unidirectional: it can both reproduce and contest hierarchy, depending on how recognition is perceived. The second article thus expanded the explanatory reach of the framework by demonstrating that client behavior can be understood through a broader repertoire of interpretive strategies shaped by emotional and symbolic cues. In doing so, it refined the analytical framework developed in the first article and provided a more differentiated account of elite navigation under asymmetry. What began as an effort to locate affectivity within PCRs evolved into a broader reflection on how actors perform through nuanced readings of respect, recognition, and status anxiety. These findings highlighted the limits of the initial analytical framework and pointed toward the need for a more flexible and relational typology—one that could capture the affective grammar of client strategy under asymmetry.

The third article transformed the “unknown knowns” revealed in earlier work into a coherent theoretical synthesis, consolidating the framework of elite navigations. Building on insights from *de facto* and partially recognized states, it extended the analysis to formally sovereign microstates under the Compact of Free Association, where dependence was legally codified rather than informally sustained. This shift in context introduced a new analytical challenge: how to account for client behavior in relationships where asymmetry persisted, but affectivity appeared muted or procedural. In addressing this puzzle, the study identified respect as the key affective variable that mediates the experience of ontological security within hierarchical yet institutionalized relationships. Respect provided the missing conceptual bridge between recognition and goal-attainment—it captured how clients interpret patronal behavior as either validating or undermining their self-conception as legitimate actors. Through this lens, the article introduced calibration as a fifth mode of elite navigation: a strategy of controlled ambiguity that allows clients to signal dissatisfaction or reassert actorness without destabilizing the overall relationship. Calibration illuminated a form of behavior that was neither confrontational nor compliant but delicately balanced between symbolic assertion and pragmatic restraint. By

theorizing respect as the affective medium through which such strategies are conceived and enacted, the article transformed affectivity from a diffuse emotional register into an operationalizable mechanism of political behavior. The conceptual payoff was twofold. First, it demonstrated that the emotional-symbolic dimension of hierarchy could be traced empirically through diplomatic practice, discourse, and signaling. Second, it showed that affectivity is not merely reactive but constitutive—an independent force shaping the possibilities of action under asymmetry. The third article thus completed the framework's evolution, translating the affective and structural insights of PCR and OST into a unified, relational theory of strategic conduct.

The cumulative development of this framework across the three articles transformed an initially descriptive account of client adaptation into an interpretive theory of relational conduct. Each empirical engagement refined the conceptual vocabulary of the dissertation: from affectivity as the bridge between material dependence and identity, to respect as the principal affective condition through which recognition is perceived and enacted. This progression yielded elite navigations as a relational framework capable of explaining how client actors interpret, negotiate, and recalibrate asymmetry across different patronal contexts. It also opened the way for a more systematic comparison not only of client strategies, but of patronage styles themselves—the affective, procedural, and symbolic modes through which patrons enact hierarchy. Turkey's intimacy, Russia's ambivalence, and the United States' proceduralism each embody distinct affective grammars that condition how respect is perceived and how strategic conduct unfolds.

Methodologically, this theoretical maturation establishes the logic of cumulative comparison that underpins the dissertation's design. The comparative synthesis that follows is a structured dialogue among different PCR cases while demonstrating how variations in affectivity, recognition, and patronal conduct generate distinct repertoires of elite navigations—how defiance, dictation, demand, conformation, and calibration are activated or constrained by the moral and symbolic texture of dependence. In this sense, the comparative synthesis chapter does not merely illustrate theoretical propositions; it completes the process of theorization by showing how structural asymmetry and affective signaling co-produce the politics of respect across diverse patron–client formations.

Scholarship on international hierarchy has primarily emphasized power, dependence, and structural asymmetry. The present dissertation complements these insights by examining how hierarchy is interpreted through recognition, affect, and routine. This perspective highlights the strategic creativity of dependent actors and the ways in which meaning-making shapes responses to asymmetry. Elite navigations offer a complementary framework for understanding how actors at the margins interpret, adapt to, and sometimes transform the hierarchies they inhabit. Accordingly, this dissertation seeks to integrate structural and interpretive dimensions within a common analytical perspective. In doing so, the dissertation contributes to ongoing efforts to better understand the strategic actorness and interpretive practices of the “Lilliputians” of international politics.

5. COMPARATIVE SYNTHESIS

This section integrates the theoretically informed foundations of PCRs and OST with the empirically derived findings from the three articles, tracing how these literatures intersect in the development of the elite navigations framework. PCR scholarship provides the structural grammar of asymmetric relationships—emphasizing hierarchy, reciprocity, and compliance—while OST adds a lens through which actors interpret these hierarchies in terms of identity, recognition, and emotional stability. Across the PCR cases examined—Turkey-TRNC, Russia-Abkhazia, and the U.S.-CoFA states—these frameworks converge to explain how client elites act within dependence not merely to secure material benefits, but to maintain ontological security through perceived respect and recognition. It is from this intersection that the typology of elite navigations emerges: a set of patterned strategies that reconcile structural constraint with identity preservation.

The comparative value of the dissertation lies in cumulatively tracing how theory and empirics inform one another. TRNC and Abkhazia exemplify partially recognized *de facto* states whose ties with their patrons are exclusive and asymmetrical but differ sharply in affective tone and perceived respect. The CoFA states, by contrast, illustrate how similar logics operate in internationally recognized microstates under treaty-based dependence. These contrasts allow the dissertation to observe how elite strategies vary not only by structural dependency but by the interpretive environments in which recognition and respect are perceived. The empirical findings demonstrate that elite navigations are relational and adaptive practices that arise from affective interpretation as much as material calculus.

Comparing Turkey-TRNC and Russia-Abkhazia reveals how structurally similar PCRs produce divergent strategies through different affective textures. TRNC elites exhibit strategies of defiance, dictation, and demanding, rooted in deep cultural intimacy and high expectations of mutual recognition with Turkey. When perceived respect falters—through economic imposition or political overreach—elites react assertively to restore ontological balance. In Abkhazia, where affective proximity to Russia is thinner and recognition incomplete, elites rely instead on conformation and defiance, shaped by the insecurity of transactional dependence. These differences show that affectivity is not a uniform bond but a variable field of interpretation: disrespect may stem from over-familiarity in one case and indifference in another.

The comparison between another pair – Turkey-TRNC and the U.S.-CoFA states – illustrates how formal recognition and institutionalization reshape affective mediation under asymmetry. While TRNC's dense affective ties generate assertive navigation in response to intimacy-based disrespect, the CoFA states operate within a codified, procedurally respectful but emotionally distant relationship. Here, demand and calibration emerge as dominant strategies: elites signal discontent or assert identity through subtle, non-confrontational acts when procedural respect replaces affective recognition. The difference underscores

how respect functions not only as a norm but as an interpretive condition that mediates structural asymmetry and strategic choice.

The PCR comparison between Russia-Abkhazia and the U.S.-CoFA states, though both dependent and symbolically peripheral, differ in how respect and recognition are institutionalized. Russia's selective engagement with Abkhazia projects conditional recognition, producing strategies of cautious conformation and muted defiance. The U.S.-CoFA states relationship, while legally speaking equal, is symbolically flat; procedural attentiveness substitutes for emotional acknowledgment, leading to strategies of demand and calibration as elites seek to reassert visibility without risking rupture. In both contexts, respect is perceived through tone and consistency rather than formal equality, showing how affective asymmetry persists even within legally codified dependence.

Patronal behavior functions as the relational environment shaping these navigations. Turkey's overfamiliar and overbearing posture provokes resistance; Russia's ambivalence constrains assertiveness; the U.S.'s proceduralism invites symbolic signaling. The distinctive affective orientation adopted by each patron constitutes the relational field within which clients interpret recognition and adjust their strategies. The comparative findings therefore suggest that elite navigations are not fixed reactions to power, but dynamic processes embedded in evolving affective and institutional contexts.

To unpack this typology further, the five strategies within *elite navigations*—defiance, dictation, demand, conformation, and calibration—represent distinct ways in which client elites manage ontological insecurity and relational imbalance.

- Defiance involves open rejection of patronal demands, often triggered by perceived disrespect or misrecognition. It signals refusal to internalize subordination without necessarily rupturing the tie.
- Dictation reverses the expected direction of influence, as clients leverage geopolitical or moral capital to shape patronal behavior. Both defiance and dictation are assertive, identity-protective responses to affective violations.
- Demand and conformation occupy the middle ground. The former reasserts reciprocal obligations when respect is perceived as recoverable; the latter aligns selectively with patronal expectations to preserve ontological stability and material continuity. These are adaptive but still expressive strategies—negotiating asymmetry without erasing actorness.
- Calibration represents a fifth, subtler mode: a strategy of symbolic signaling and strategic ambiguity used to express dissatisfaction or autonomy while preserving the relationship. It arises when disrespect is perceived but confrontation is too costly. Through gestures, timing, and tone, calibration restores a sense of recognition without destabilizing the structure.

Taken together, these five strategies capture the spectrum of elite responses under asymmetry—from overt resistance to strategic accommodation. They reveal that client actorness is neither binary nor episodic but patterned through relational

interpretation. Each strategy embodies a different way of managing ontological anxiety within dependence, balancing the pursuit of recognition with the imperatives of survival.

By embedding this typology within the dual framework of PCR and OST, the dissertation provides a comprehensive explanation of how client states act under structural constraint and affective uncertainty. PCR scholarship supplies the structural logic—how asymmetry, reciprocity, and durability define the material conditions of dependence—while OST explains how identity, recognition, and respect shape the emotional landscape of decision-making. Elite navigations bridge these literatures, showing that client behavior is not a mechanical reaction to power but an affectively mediated practice of self-preservation. This synthesis complements existing models centered on compliance or rebellion by identifying a broader continuum of strategies through which client actors sustain legitimacy, defend dignity, and renegotiate asymmetry over time.

While elite navigations illuminate how client actors interpret and manage dependence, their strategic possibilities are co-constituted by the patronal environments in which they unfold. Patrons do not merely impose structure; they perform authority through affective and symbolic gestures that define the moral and emotional tone of hierarchy. These performances of care, distance, or ambiguity generate the interpretive conditions under which clients read respect, recognition, and legitimacy. Understanding these affective grammars of patronage is therefore crucial: they determine whether asymmetry is experienced as tolerable cooperation, conditional alignment, or disrespectful domination, shaping the emotional field within which elite navigations are conceived and enacted.

5.1. Patronage Styles as an Emergent Comparative Finding

Beyond variation in elite navigations, the comparative analysis generated an additional and unanticipated insight. While the theoretical framework centered on client interpretation of asymmetry, the cross-case comparison revealed systematic differences in how patrons themselves enact and perform hierarchical authority. These patterned modes of authority expression—what this dissertation conceptualizes as patronage styles—were not pre-defined categories but emerged inductively from the empirical material. They reflect recurring affective grammars through which patrons articulate obligation, recognition, and control. Identifying these styles extends PCR tradition by complementing attention to structural asymmetry with the performative dimension of patronal authority.

These affective structures crystallize in distinct patronage styles. Each patron embodies a distinct affective grammar—a patterned way of expressing authority, obligation, and recognition that structures the emotional texture of the relationship. Turkey's approach is marked by familial paternalism, an idiom of closeness that combines moral obligation with intrusive familiarity. It projects intimacy through shared history, religion, and identity, yet this very intimacy legitimizes intervention and evokes resentment when it blurs the boundaries of respect.

Russia, by contrast, operates through strategic ambivalence: its patronage is transactional, oscillating between protection and neglect. Recognition is partial and selective, offered as leverage rather than affirmation, leaving clients suspended between gratitude and mistrust. The United States represents a third mode—bureaucratic proceduralism—anchored in legal formality and administrative distance. Its respect is conveyed through compliance with institutional norms rather than emotional engagement. Each of these grammars defines what respect looks and feels like within the dyad, setting the conditions under which it can be perceived, contested, or withheld. The differences are not merely stylistic but structural: they shape how dependence is experienced, how actorness is signaled, and how ontological security is either stabilized or unsettled within enduring asymmetry.

The patronal affective grammars produce distinct relational consequences, shaping not only the tone of dependence but also the repertoire of elite navigations available to clients. Under Turkey's familial paternalism, respect is expressed through intimacy yet undermined by overreach; when paternal care becomes directive authority, client elites respond with defiance or dictation to reassert symbolic parity. In Russia's strategically ambivalent patronage, recognition is always conditional, fostering conformation and muted defiance as the safest means to preserve material support without exposing ontological vulnerability. The transactional nature of Russian engagement leaves little room for moral reciprocity, compelling clients to stabilize their identity through restraint rather than challenge. In the United States' bureaucratic proceduralism, the absence of emotional proximity creates a different kind of insecurity: clients perceive formal equality but emotional distance, prompting calibration and demand as strategies to elicit acknowledgment without rupturing the relationship. Across all three, the affective grammar of patronage determines how respect circulates—whether as care, conditionality, or procedure—and thereby how clients interpret their standing within the hierarchy. Patronal behavior is thus not a static background variable but an active force co-producing the emotional economy of dependence, conditioning both compliance and contestation within asymmetric order.

The identification of patronage styles therefore extends the analytical scope of PCR scholarship by complementing analyses of client behavior and structural asymmetry with attention to the performative dimension of patronal authority. By demonstrating that patrons enact hierarchy through patterned affective grammars—familial, ambivalent, or procedural—the analysis highlights the performative dimension of authority within asymmetric relationships. Patronal power is not exercised uniformly; it is expressed through culturally and institutionally embedded modes of recognition, conditionality, and distance. Conceptualizing patronage style as a dimension of hierarchical variation opens a new line of inquiry into how different patrons construct, sustain, and legitimize asymmetric order. Future research may explore whether such styles correlate with regime type, geopolitical position, historical legacies, or leadership change, and how shifts in patronal conduct reshape the emotional architecture of dependence over time.

Taken together, the identification of patronage styles deepens the dissertation's core argument about affectivity and hierarchy. If elite navigations explain how clients interpret and respond to asymmetry, patronage styles clarify how asymmetry is enacted and signaled by patrons themselves. Hierarchy thus emerges not only as a structural condition, but as an interactional process shaped by patterned expressions of authority, recognition, and distance. By incorporating patronal style into the analysis, the framework captures asymmetry as a relational field co-produced by both sides of the dyad—an evolving configuration of material constraint and affective meaning.

6. CONCLUSION

This dissertation addresses a central theoretical gap in the study of asymmetric international relationships: the limited understanding of how client state behavior is exercised and experienced under conditions of structural dependence and ontological insecurity. Existing PCR research has generated important insights into the persistence of asymmetry through material and institutional dependence. The present dissertation complements these structural explanations by examining how affective and interpretive dimensions contribute to sustaining or destabilizing compliance. Conversely, OST has illuminated how identity continuity and recognition shape state behavior but rarely engages with structurally subordinate contexts. By integrating these literatures, this dissertation develops a dual-layered framework that links the material logic of dependence with the emotional-symbolic logic of recognition. In doing so, it contributes to bringing these two research traditions into closer analytical dialogue by examining how affectivity links patron–client relations and ontological security.

Building on these foundations, the dissertation advances a conceptual synthesis in which affectivity—long treated as peripheral or culturally contingent—is theorized as a constitutive dimension of asymmetric relations. Affectivity here is not emotion in the abstract, but the medium through which recognition, legitimacy, and respect are perceived and enacted. Respect, in turn, is conceptualized as the key interpretive condition linking affectivity to ontological security. Rather than assuming recognition as a static good, the analysis treats respect as a dynamic, relational practice—expressed, withheld, or interpreted in ways that shape strategic orientation. This reconceptualization extends OST beyond the maintenance of identity narratives to encompass affective negotiation under asymmetry, while enriching PCR scholarship by showing that perceived respect mediates how structural conditions are interpreted and translated into compliance and adaptation. Through this theoretical lens, the dissertation reconceives asymmetry not as a static condition of domination but as an ongoing negotiation of meaning and status.

From this theoretical convergence, the dissertation develops the framework of elite navigations—a typology of strategic behaviors through which client state elites interpret, manage, and respond to asymmetric dependence. Situated at the intersection of structural constraint and affective interpretation, elite navigations describe how political actors seek to preserve ontological security while balancing material reliance and symbolic dignity. The typology identifies five patterned strategies—defiance, dictation, demanding, conformation, and calibration—each corresponding to different combinations of structural pressure and affective experience. This framework builds on the known knowns of PCR and ontological security theory, addresses their shared known unknowns regarding client actorness and affect, and brings previously unknown knowns—most notably respect as an affective mechanism—into analytical focus. In doing so, it offers an empirically grounded framework of client behavior that links affective perception to strategic

adaptation under asymmetry. It shows that dependent polities' behavior under asymmetry cannot be reduced to compliance or defiance alone but unfolds through relationally embedded practices shaped by the perceived presence or absence of respect.

Empirically, the dissertation demonstrates how this framework operates across three structurally dependent but relationally distinct contexts: Turkey-TRNC, Russia-Abkhazia, and the U.S.-the CoFA states. The comparative analysis reveals that material asymmetry alone does not determine client strategy; rather, it is the affective texture of each relationship that conditions how dependence is navigated. In the Turkey-TRNC relationship, dense affective ties and cultural intimacy generate assertive navigations—defiance, dictation, and demand—as elites seek to restore parity when closeness is experienced as disrespect. Abkhazia's thinner, transactional bond with Russia yields strategies of conformation and defiance, reflecting attempts to preserve stability under conditional recognition. The CoFA states' treaty-based yet affectively distant relationship with the United States produces demand and calibration—subtle, symbolic assertions of actorhood aimed at restoring recognition without jeopardizing material support. Across these cases, respect functions as the interpretive hinge between structural dependence and ontological security: its presence stabilizes alignment; its absence activates strategic recalibration.

Theoretically, this cumulative analysis refines both parent literatures. For PCR tradition, it demonstrates that asymmetry is sustained not only through exchange and coercion but through affective management—where respect and recognition serve as currencies of legitimacy. For OST, it grounds ontological security in hierarchical relationships, showing that insecurity arises as much from perceived disrespect as from narrative disruption. The concept of elite navigations bridges these frameworks, offering a mid-range theory of strategic action that captures how identity, legitimacy, and material constraint interact in durable yet dynamic hierarchies.

Methodologically, the dissertation illustrates the value of cumulative, abductive comparison for theory-building in asymmetric relations. It contributes to the theory-building and refines concepts through iterative engagement with empirical observation. By tracing elite discourse, diplomatic signaling, and historical narratives, it shows how affective dimensions such as respect or symbolic marginalization can be identified and analyzed as observable indicators of ontological security. This approach demonstrates the potential of interpretivist and relational methodologies for uncovering how actors experience structural dependence—not only materially but emotionally and symbolically.

While the dissertation provides a layered theoretical and empirical account of client strategy under asymmetry, several scope conditions and opportunities for further research remain. The focus on clear-cut PCRs, such as Turkey-TRNC and the U.S.-CoFA relationships, enhances conceptual clarity while defining the range of contexts to which the proposed framework is most readily applicable. More complex or multilateral dependencies may involve additional dynamics that warrant further investigation. Reliance on elite discourse and public

documentation prioritizes publicly articulated strategies over informal practices or private negotiations. Moreover, consistent with its interpretivist and abductive research strategy, the dissertation seeks mid-range theoretical development rather than statistical causal generalization. These considerations therefore indicate promising avenues for future research rather than weaknesses in the research design.

Future research can extend the elite navigations framework to more diffuse or contested patronage systems—such as cases involving multiple patrons, quasi-patrons, or regionally embedded asymmetric partnerships. Examining settings where dependence is negotiated across competing external actors or partially institutionalized arrangements would test the framework’s adaptability and reveal additional strategic modes. Ethnographic and archival approaches could further illuminate how respect, recognition, and insecurity are negotiated behind closed doors, while longitudinal analyses could track how strategies evolve through regime change or shifting global hierarchies. Such extensions would enrich the theoretical and empirical foundations of relational asymmetry in global politics.

Ultimately, this dissertation argues that asymmetric relations can only be understood through a relational perspective that integrates power, identity, and emotion. By demonstrating how respect mediates the experience of dependence and how elites navigate the insecurities it generates, the study reframes patron–client relations as arenas of continuous negotiation rather than static hierarchies. In doing so, it advances a broader insight: international order is sustained as much by the affective management of hierarchy as by coercion or exchange, and the pursuit of recognition remains central to how even the most marginal of political entities act, adapt, and endure. In the end, the Lilliputians of international politics do not merely endure hierarchy—they shape it through their emotional, strategic, and interpretive labor.

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SUMMARY IN ESTONIAN

Hierarhia, identiteet ja eliitide navigatsioonimustrid: sõltuvate poliitiliste üksuste patrooni-kliendi suhted

Käesolev väitekiri uurib, kuidas poliitiliselt sõltuvad üksused navigeerivad asümmeetrilistes suhetes võimsamate riikidega. Neid suhteid käsitletakse patrooni–kliendi suhetena (PKS), mida iseloomustab struktuurne ebavõrdsus, kus klient sõltub patroonist julgeoleku, majanduslike ressursside või rahvusvahelise ligipääsu osas. Väitekirja uurimisprobleem keskendub sellele, kuidas sedasorti üksused, vaatamata oma piiratud autonoomiale ja rahvusvahelise tunnustuse kitsendustele, teostavad agentsust ning toimivad poliitiliselt olemasoleva sõltuvuse tingimustes.

Mõnevõrra täpsemana sõnastatuna uurib väitekiri seda, kuidas klientriigid navigeerivad asümmeetrilistes suhetes väljenduva ontoloogilise ebakindluse tingimustes ning millised strateegiad kujunevad reaktsioonina erinevates patrooni–kliendi suhete kontekstides? Selline probleemiasetus peegeldab laiemat teadmiste tühimikku rahvusvaheliste suhete uurimustes. Kuigi varasemad käsitlused on keskendunud peamiselt patrooni-kliendi suhete asümmeetria materiaalsele poolele ja sellest tulenevale struktuursele sõltuvusele, siis on vähem tähelepanu pööratud sellele, kuidas kliendiosalised ise sõltuvussuhet kogevad, tõlgendavad ja strateegiliselt käsitlevad. Samal ajal on ontoloogilise julgeoleku teoorias (OJT) väljenduvat identiteedi, tunnustuse ja stabiilse enesetaju vajadust harva süstemaatiliselt rakendatud hierarhilistele riikidevahelistele suhetele. Käesolev väitekiri põimib eeltoodud teoreetilised suundumused ja demonstreerib seda, kuidas materiaalne sõltuvus ja afektiivsed tegurid – nagu austus, tunnustus ja legitiimsus – koostoimes kujundavad kliendiosalise käitumist.

Teoreetiline raamistik ühendab patrooni–kliendi suhete ja ontoloogilise julgeoleku teooria vaatenurgad. PKS-i teoreetiline lähenemine pakub struktuurse aluse, tuues esile sellised tunnused nagu asümmeetria, vastastikkuse, kestvuse ja allumise, ning selgitab, kuidas ebavõrdseid suhteid hoitakse elus ressursside ja kohustuste vahetuse kaudu. Samas jääb selline vaatenurk eraldivõetuna piiratuks, sest siit ei lähtu see teadmine, kuidas kliendiosalised neid suhteid ise kogevad ja tõlgendavad. Ontoloogilise julgeoleku teooria seevastu täiendab PKS-i teoreetilist lähenemist läbi sellise vaatenurga, kus poliitilised toimijad otsivad järjepidevust, tunnustust ja identiteedi stabiilsust. See annab lisateadmise, et riike motiveerivad mitte ainult materiaalsed huvid, vaid ka vajadus säilitada sidus enesetaju ja legitiimsus.

Kahe erineva teoreetilise lähenemise sünteesis võtab väitekiri kasutusele mõiste „eliidi navigeerimine“ ja loob sellega seonduva analüütilise raamistiku. Eliidi navigeerimine viitab erinevatele strateegiatele, mille kaudu sõltuvate poliitiliste üksuste eliidid haldavad pinget struktuursete piirangute ja identiteedi säilitamise vahel. Siinkohal väärrib rõhutamist, et kliendiosalise käitumist ei saa taandada pelgale allumisele või vastupanule. Pigem hõlmab see strateegiate

repertuaari, mida kujundavad nii materiaalsed tingimused kui ka afektiivsed tajud, eriti see, kas suhet kogetakse austava või alandavana. Väitekiri tutvustab viit erinevat eliidi navigeerimise viisi: vastuhakk (*defiance*), dikteerimine (*dictation*), nõudmine (*demand*), kohandumine (*conformation*) ja kalibreerimine (*calibration*). Need strateegiad kirjeldavad erinevaid viise, kuidas kliendiosalisel reageerivad patrooni mõjule, ulatudes enesekindlast vastupanust strateegilise kohandumise ja peenhäälestamiseni. See viitab sellele, et kliendiosalisel tõlgendavad ja esitlevad oma positsioone läbi hierarhiliste suhete patrooniga aktiivselt mitte reaktiivselt, tulenevalt struktuursetest piirangutest.

Metodoloogiliselt kasutab väitekiri kvalitatiivset, interpretatiivset ja võrdlevat uurimisdisaini. See on üles ehitatud publikatsioonidepõhise väitekirjana, mis koosneb kolmest eelretsenseeritud artiklist, millest igaüks keskendub erinevale empiirilisele juhtumile. Uurimistöö tugineb abduktiivsele lähenemisele, mis otsib olemasoleva(te)le teooria(te)le lisaseletust läbi empiiriliste vaatluste. Andmeallikateks on poliitilise diskursust peegeldavad ametlikud avaldused, õigusalsed dokumendid, meediamaterjalid ja sekundaarne kirjandus, pöörates erilist tähelepanu sellele, kuidas kliendiosalise eliidid sõnastavad identiteeti, reageerivad välisele survele ja raamistavad oma strateegilisi valikuid.

Empiiriline analüüs põhineb kolmel juhtumil: Põhja-Küpros, Abhaasia ning Vaba Assotsiatsiooni Lepingu (CoFA) riigid – nimelt Mikroneesia Liiduriigid, Marshalli Saared ja Palau. Need juhtumid valiti selleks, et hõlmata varieeruvust kliendiosalise rahvusvahelise tunnustatuse, patrooni-kliendi suhete struktuurse iseloomu ja kliendiosalise eliidi strateegilise käitumise osas. Selles valikus esindavad Põhja-Küpros ja Abhaasia de facto riike oma piiratud rahvusvahelise tunnustusega ning tugeva sõltuvusega ühest patroonist, samas kui CoFA riigid on rahvusvaheliselt tunnustatud mikroriigid, millel on formaliseeritud sõltuvussuhted Ameerika Ühendriikidega.

Publikatsioonidepõhise väitekirjana analüüsitakse empiiriat ja panustatakse teoreetilise raamistiku arendamisse kolme iseseisva artikli kaudu. Esimene artikkel, mis keskendub Põhja-Küprosele, tutvustab eliidi navigeerimise mõistet ja näitab, kuidas poliitilised eliidid reageerivad patrooni mõjule nii ennastkehtestavate kui ka patroonile kohanduvate strateegiate kaudu. See kinnitab seda, et isegi tugeva sõltuvuse tingimustes võivad kliendiosalisel ilmutada vastuhakku ja dikteerimist, vaidlustades ühtlasi arusaama passiivsusest välise kontrolli vastuvõtmisel. Teine artikkel käsitleb Abhaasiat, täpsustab eliidi navigeerimise tüpoloogiat, lisades kohandumise (*conformation*) kategooria, ning näitab, kuidas afektiivsete sidemete ja suhete struktuuri varieeruvus mõjutab kliendi käitumist. Võrreldes Põhja-Küprosega ilmneb Abhaasia puhul tehingulisem suhe patrooniga, mille tulemuseks on ettevaatlikumad ja piiratumad strateegilised kalkulatsioonid, mida kujundab suurenenud ontoloogiline ebakindlus. Kolmas artikkel analüüsib CoFA riike ning arendab teoreetilist raamistikku edasi, tuues sisse austuse kui keskse dimensiooni afektiivsuse puhul ning määratledes kalibreerimise eraldi-seisva strateegiana eliidi navigeerimisel. Siinkohal näidatakse veenvalt, et isegi formaalselt struktureeritud ja vabatahtlikes suhetes peavad kliendiosaleja eliidid aktiivseid läbirääkimisi autonoomia ja tunnustuse üle, kasutades peenhäälestavaid

strateegiaid asümmeetria haldamiseks. Kokkuvõttes annavad kõik kolm artiklit kumulatiivse ülevaate sellest, kuidas sõltuvad poliitilised üksused navigeerivad asümmeetrilistes suhetes erinevates geopoliitilistes ja institutsionaalsetes kontekstides. Nende artiklite raames arendatakse teoreetilist raamistikku erinevate juhtumite lõikes – algsest kontseptualiseerimisest võrdleva täpsustamiseni ja uute analüütiliste dimensioonide lisamiseni – ning kus afektiivsuse keskne roll leiab erilise rõhuasetuse kliendiosaleja strateegilise käitumise kujundamisel.

Väitekirja keskse järelduse kohaselt etendab afektiivsus – eriti austuse ja tunnustuse tajumisel – otsustavat rolli kliendiosaleja strateegiate kujunemisel. Struktuurne asümmeetria üksi ei määra kliendiosaleja käitumist. Oluline on teada, kuidas eliidid tõlgendavad kohtlemist enda suhtes: see mõjutab, kas nad alluvad, osutavad vastupanu või kalibreerivad oma positsioone ümber. Kui suhet tajutakse vastastikku tunnustavana ja austavana, siis võib asümmeetria stabiilsena toimida ja elus püsida. Vastupidisel korral tekitab tajutud lugupidamatuse või marginaliseerimise kogemus ontoloogilist ebakindlust ja ajendab ette võtma strateegilisi kohandumisi. Teine oluline panus teadusloomesse on tõik, et sõltuvad poliitilised üksused ei ole passiivsed vaid aktiivsed osalised rahvusvahelise suhete hierarhia kujundamises ja säilitamises. Oma strateegilistes valikutes mõjutavad kliendiosalejad seda, kuidas hierarhilised suhted toimivad ja arenevad. See seab kahtluse alla traditsioonilised käsitlused, mis näevad sedasorti üksusi pelgalt alluvatena, ning vastupidiselt eeltoodule, lasevad paista nende agentsust piiratud tingimustes. Lisaks panustab väitekirja laiema rahvusvaheliste suhete aruteludesse, ühendades struktuursed ja interpretatiivsed lähenemised võimule ja hierarhiale. See laiendab PKS-i teoreetilist lähenemist, lisades afektiivsed ja identiteedipõhised dimensioonid, ning arendab ontoloogilise julgeoleku teooriat, rakendades seda asümmeetrilistele riikidevahelistele suhetele.

Kokkuvõttes näitab väitekirja, et asümmeetrilised suhted ei ole pelgalt materiaalselt struktureeritud, vaid ka afektiivsete keskkondade poolt mõjutatud, ning kus poliitilised toimijad püüavad tasakaalustada sõltuvust väärikusega ja struktuurseid piiranguid agentsusega. Selline vaatenurk rõhutab tunnustuse, austuse ja identiteedi tähtsust rahvusvahelise poliitilise käitumise kujundamisel, eriti just nende toimijate puhul, mis tegutsevad rahvusvahelise süsteemi äärealadel.

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Juhendatud väitekirjad

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