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A Complex Border: Intractability and the Physical Roots of Discursive Legitimations in Cyprus

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Abstract

The Cypriot conflict is one of the most intractable conflicts of the modern era, and the collapse of complexity among the actors in the conflict—mainly the Republic of Cyprus, North Cyprus, and Turkey—appears to be the main cause of the continued "no war, no peace" state. Subsequent socio-psychological self-organization among these actors then produces conflict-perpetuating feedback loops and dynamics. These dynamics include identity narratives, narratives of "the other," and narratives of the nature of the conflict, which, at the grassroots level, can legitimize ongoing engagement in the conflict, whereas peace is painted as an undesirable and undeserved/unjust compromise. Given this, there is a lack of root narrative research on the Cypriot case; less still are works connecting intractability in the Cypriot conflict to the border dynamics in Cyprus. Indeed, border studies indicate that borders can function as both symbolic and physical attractors for the conflict, for they may become fonts of past and present traumas and grievances as well as direct obstructions towards building cross-cutting bonds. As such, there is a need to increase our scholarly understanding of how the border between Cypriots affects both the conflict dynamics and, therefore, the success of peace processes within the context of the Cypriot conflict. This article will analyze the socio-political mechanics as well as prevalent narratives regarding the conflict on both sides of Cyprus to locate the dominance and impact of the border and to hypothesize how physical barriers and unaddressed grievances can perpetuate conflict and undermine peace negotiations.

Keywords

borders; conflict resolution; Cyprus; intractability; root narrative theory

1. Introduction

Long-lasting conflicts, most of which spill over beyond any peace process or the end of the dispute's violent phase, require self-legitimation along the moral and political lines. Without such legitimacy widely accepted at least within a conflict-oriented system, the system would be defied, and it would eventually be altered. Given this, legitimation can best be understood through engagement with long-lasting—that is, protracted or intractable—conflicts. One such conflict is the Cypriot conflict. In this article, I will provide a case study focusing on the Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot narrative legitimations of intractability and peacebuilding which center the border bisecting the island.

The Cypriot conflict is generally recognized as one of the most intractable conflicts of the modern era and Nicosia, the last divided capital city in the world, is located in the heart of the island of Cyprus. The island's division stems from post-independence intercommunal strife between Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots from 1963 to 1974, and then the Greek junta's coup on the island as well as the consequent Turkish military intervention into the conflict in 1974. Turkey has historically deemed the intervention a legitimate peace operation (labeled Happy Peace Operation) but most of the world, including the de jure sovereign of the island which is the Republic of Cyprus (RoC), consider the act to be an invasion and subsequent occupation. Regardless of how one interprets the nature of the intervention, the result does not vary: the UN-drawn Green Line which separated Nicosia was extended to the whole island and an unrecognized de facto state called the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) was formed in 1983, laying claim to about a third of the island. Turkey supports the TRNC economically, diplomatically, and militarily and in effect occupies its de facto territories as it maintains a 40,000-strong military presence in the area. The influence of Turkey on the TRNC is beyond dispute, although scholars disagree as to the level of said influence: whether such influence renders the TRNC a puppet state, for example, and how much room for Turkish Cypriot agency remains (Berg & Yüksel, 2023; Cooley & Mitchell, 2010; Kolsto, 2006; Kopeček et al., 2016).

It is important to note that this article uses the term order to refer to the Buffer Zone in a descriptive manner, i.e., to refer to the fact that one has to cross walls, guardhouses, militarized and demilitarized zones, as well as checkpoints (while showing paperwork), among others, to cross from the RoC to the de facto state of TRNC and vice versa, in effect creating a border. However, from an international legal sense and considering the recognized de jure sovereignty claims, there is no border, but a ceasefire line (the Green Line) surrounded by a demilitarized Buffer Zone and barriers situated between the two areas of Cyprus that occupy 3% of the island. This zone is administered by the UN through the United Nations Forces in Cyprus. Given that the Buffer Zone provides for an exceptional space vis-à-vis international law and international relations, the article uses the term border for conceptual clarity; this use should by no means be misconstrued as lending any legitimacy to the Turkish Cypriot claim to statehood.

Turkey's intervention of 1974 has also meant that the island's two communities were completely segregated along ethnic, linguistic, and religious lines from 1974 to 2003. In 2003, some gates opened along the Green Line, which have allowed for intercommunal interactions. Nevertheless, such interactions have been relatively limited due to many factors, including whether Greek Cypriots consider cross-border travel through the Green Line as contributing to what they consider to be Turkey's illegal division and occupation of the island's territories. Considering the creation of cross-cutting bonds and trust through positive intercommunal interactions is essential for peacebuilding, a refusal to cross the Green Line can be

considered a widely adopted, conflict-perpetuating approach to coping with the politicized and moralized bordering realities on the ground. This framing of crossing to the other side being tantamount to treachery is but one of the many mechanisms that politically and morally maintain intractability that centers the border. Through a case study that involved a root narrative analysis (RNA) of the discursive legitimations of conflict-oriented and peace-oriented approaches to the Cypriot conflict, this article argues that physical borders act as a symbolically important centerpiece around which to weave narratives in territorial disputes. Understanding and addressing how such often-neglected discursive dimensions that define and delimit vernacular practices in dealing with injustices, division, inherited intergenerational traumas, and addressing these everyday dynamics will prove essential to reducing, if not resolving, conflictuality in Cyprus, which will naturally have broader implications for reducing tensions inherent to the region's geopolitical rivalries and competing interests.

2. Literature Review and Conceptual Framework: Legitimation and Bordering Dynamics in Cyprus

Scholars have come to criticize the application of legitimacy as a concept and especially the application of classical legitimacy theories which center state–citizen relations to conflict and post-conflict settings where the locus, materialities, boundaries, and legitimacy of authority come under question (Backström, 2020; Dagher, 2017; Von Billerbeck & Gippert, 2017). Indeed, while cognizant of power asymmetries overall, classical theories of legitimacy require modification before being applied in the highly complex, ever-evolving, dynamic settings of a conflict. Nonetheless, some general points of consensus need be considered. First, internal legitimacy paves the way for effective state-building (Andersen, 2012; Dagher, 2021; Roberts, 2008) as well as effective peacebuilding (Hancock & Mitchell, 2018; Leonardsson & Rudd, 2015; Paffenholz, 2015). Achieving internal legitimacy in these settings would likely include nation-building as previously-conflicting groups need to be consolidated under a supra-ethnic, supra-linguistic, supra-religious, and supra-ideological umbrella (Lemay-Hébert, 2009). Indeed, externally-enforced state-building or peacebuilding efforts produce limited positive results such as weak statehood (Barnett & Zürcher, 2009). Second, beyond the legitimacy of state institutions, there is a need to look at performance legitimacy, i.e., how effective is the state or are the peacebuilders in achieving their responsibilities and goals (Berg, 2013; Dagher, 2018). Can the state secure its borders and provide for societal prosperity (Call & Cousens, 2008)? Can peacebuilders actually maintain neutrality and provide a mutually-acceptable resolution (Gippert, 2017; Richmond & Mac Ginty, 2020; Roberts, 2015)? This article will consider both the institutional and performance aspects of political legitimacy as pertinent to the analysis of bordering in Cyprus.

Importantly, moral legitimation appears to largely be absent from empirical studies of unrecognized states. While moral legitimation of each side's positioning (especially as the victim) in conflicts is prevalent (Jankowitz, 2018; On'sha, 2019; Varvin, 2005), moral legitimation is not particularly tackled in conflict settings. This is likely because moral grounds—i.e., perceptions of fairness and justice (Bowers & Robinson, 2012)—is specifically the origin of conflict perpetuation whereas perceptions of moral positioning of parties to the conflict vary greatly both within the in-groups and out-groups as neither group is monolithic. Nonetheless, as morality and moral legitimation narratives have extensively been applied to borders and bordering practices (El Qadim et al., 2021, 2021; Kritzman-Amir & Spijkerboer, 2013; Paasi et al., 2019; Parsons, 2020; Schewel, 2016; Vega, 2018), this article will also consider the relationship among bordering practices, political legitimation, and moral legitimation as an analytical focus.

The previously-identified gap between legitimacy theories and on-the-ground dynamics and realities of conflicts widens further where conflicts involving unrecognized states are concerned, as they inevitably involve a parent and a secessionist state being able to assert at least de facto and, in the case of parent states, also de jure sovereignty through international law, territorial control, and effective governance of held territories (Bryant, 2014; Hoch & Rudincová, 2015; Owtram, 2011). Given this, for the purposes of this article, I will focus on reviewing how the concept and theories of legitimacy have been applied to conflicts and unrecognized states.

Several works have attempted to apply the concept of legitimacy in cases of conflict involving unrecognized states such as North Cyprus, Abkhazia, and Somaliland, among others (Athanassiou, 2010; Bakke, O'Loughlin, et al., 2014; Berg, 2013; Pegg & Kolstø, 2015). Scholars in general agree that parent states (from which unrecognized states secede) default to international customary laws governing territorial change and sovereignty to legitimize territorial claims as well as claims to justice and victim identity while denying the secessionist entity's appeals for recognition (Berg, 2012; Berg & Pegg, 2020). Therefore, parent states prefer focusing on legal legitimation approaches despite customary laws providing only a reference point; that is, there are some international standards provided by the Stimson Doctrine and the Montevideo Convention regarding the parameters for statehood which have often been bent (East Timor) or broken/modified (Kosovo). Indeed, there are no binding agreements on how, when, and under what conditions statehood may be claimed. Nevertheless, such standards are invoked often enough to provide a generally acceptable legitimation strategy and are therefore understandably adopted by the parent states against unilateral secession claims levied extra-legally by unrecognized states. Parent states also employ arguments against separatism, emphasizing unrecognized states' secessionism and grey-area status as threats to the international order as such (J. Harvey & Stansfield, 2011; Kolstø & Blakkisrud, 2011; Kyris, 2017). Given this rhetoric, they promote a largely conflict-oriented approach of no engagement—even without recognition—with unrecognized states to avoid implied recognition and to render the secessionist entity non-viable and thus engendering its prompt re-absorption (Coggins, 2006; Comai, 2018; Cooley & Mitchell, 2010; Ulas, 2017). Some scholars, however, disagree about the degree of threat posed by unrecognized states (J. Harvey & Stansfield, 2011; J. C. Harvey, 2010) which would undermine the degree to which such policies may be legitimized. Overall, we can sum up the legitimacy narratives of the parent state as emphasizing the legitimacy of their territorial claims as externally recognized and as supported by a somewhat ill-defined customary laws, with a supporting narrative of unrecognized states-as-threat. In the case of Cyprus, the international community and UN decisions give legitimacy to the RoC's narrative while delegitimizing Turkish Cypriot claims and reducing their self-narrated independent governance to one of being puppets of the occupying Turkish army.

Scholars of unrecognized states focus mainly on two aspects of legitimacy as pertaining to such states: internal and external legitimacy. Many scholars assert that most unrecognized states are able to cultivate enough of a modicum of internal sovereignty (establishing governance mechanisms and controlling a set territory and set populations) to satisfy the Montevideo criteria (Bakke, Linke, et al., 2014; Bakke, O'Loughlin, et al., 2014; Pegg & Kolstø, 2015). Meanwhile, their unilateral secession and subsequent unrecognition by the international community renders them pariah states, isolating them at large from international diplomacy and economic markets with exceptions being Taiwan which is partially recognized and Somaliland which provides access to the Arabian Peninsula for landlocked Ethiopia thus benefiting from the animal husbandry trade (Caspersen, 2012; Ulas, 2017). As such, scholars find that unrecognized states

employ strategies to seek further external recognition, ranging from arguments on fulfilling their roles as proper states to utilizing tourism to seeking alliances (Cloutier & Dembinska, 2021; Hoch & Rudincová, 2015; Pegg & Kolstø, 2015). Therefore, we can say that the scholars reviewed above believe unrecognized states not only desire but also perceive a need for obtaining external legitimacy. Especially when their sponsor state and/or their prospective allies are democratic, this pursuit of external legitimacy can lead to more democratic and peace-oriented behavior by the unrecognized state in turn (Kanol, 2014; Kopeček et al., 2016; Ulas, 2017). Some scholars, in reverse, argue that isolation from external influences may in turn promote stronger democratization (Ulas, 2017; Voller, 2015). By all scholars, however, diplomatic legitimacy is considered an ultimate goal and internal legitimacy is seen as necessary to achieve said goal, for if a secessionist government cannot claim to represent the people for whose sake it claims to have been formed, then all routes to legitimacy may close. As I argue in Section 4, however, there is an increasing resistance against the Northern Cypriot institutional politics, but this has not led to a change in the status quo as Turkish Cypriot social movements do not make an impact on Turkey and neither do they get enough international attention or support to make a difference (Ulas, 2021).

This study addresses the following gaps in extant scholarship: What institutional and narrative mechanisms, exactly, have been adopted by either side to the Cypriot conflict to support their claims and to legitimize their commitment to conflict over peacebuilding, as any peacebuilding effort is likely to fail without changes to local, everyday practices and mindsets and that would increase local ownership of the process? In fact, how does either community go about delegitimizing attempts at peacebuilding at local, national, and international levels? This is the gap the present study aims to address. For the purposes of this article, I pursue the hypothesis that the existing de facto border between the TRNC and the RoC, with its miles of walls, watchtowers, the United-Nations-Forces-in-Cyprus-administered Buffer Zone, checkpoints, guard posts, etc., coupled with its function as an open-air museum—more on this momentarily—serves as the symbolic center around which Cypriot master narratives about the conflict self-organize, as well as the narrative center through which either side perpetuates what is known as a comfortable, profitable (for elites) frozen conflict (Adamides, 2015; Ciobanu, 2009; King, 2001; Ulas, 2017).

How can international community constructively deal with unrecognized/de facto states? One way is to militarily end the secessionist movement, which has often been utilized in cases such as Tamil Eelam or Aceh (Florea, 2014); however, this appears unlikely for Cyprus due to the relative military prowess of the RoC and Turkey as well as the EU's unwillingness to engage in warfare with the latter. Only very few cases of unilateral secession have ended in recognition, mostly when such secession was precipitated by traumatic events such as genocide (e.g., Kosovo and East Timor; Berg & Molder, 2012; Florea, 2014; Martin, 2001). Many secessionist entities meanwhile either have accepted a modicum of autonomy to settle their contentions (e.g., Catalonia) or they continue existing in a grey area of de facto governance without external recognition (e.g., North Cyprus, Abkhazia, South Osetia, Transnistria, etc.). The latter group face isolations along economic, diplomatic, and social (e.g., lack of professional sports) lines due to lacking international legitimacy. Taiwan (Republic of China) and Kosovo provide cases of exception here: The former enjoys some official recognition (11 states) as well as widespread social and economic inclusion, whereas the latter was recognized through a paradigm of earned sovereignty which has only officially been applied to Kosovo alone. While some unrecognized states have attempted to make a case for democratic statehood and thus earned sovereignty after Kosovo's secession and independence was widely recognized, this option appears far-fetched as the secession of Kosovo was exceptional and inimitable to begin with (Berg & Molder, 2012).

In the realm of international relations, the issue of dealing with unrecognized states boils down to questions of balances of power/interests, geopolitical calculations, and ultimately, upholding international law. However, as unrecognized states have shown a propensity to persist despite isolations and pressure from the parent state and international community—due, mostly, to patron state support—issues such as migration, smuggling (drugs, historical artifacts, etc.), natural resource management, etc., have emerged which require coordination between international entities, the parent state, and the unrecognized entity. Some scholars have worried that engaging these entities and providing them an economic venue may usher in implied recognition, which would contravene international law. Meanwhile, some scholars and policymakers were concerned with the growing dependence of unrecognized states on their sponsor states, not only diminishing their autonomy but also undermining peacebuilding efforts through the empowerment of shadow negotiators. As such, engagement without recognition (EWR) emerged as a paradigm to allow for any state or international organization, within realms and manners dictated by the parent state, to engage with an unrecognized entity when humanitarian or international security issues become pertinent (Cooley & Mitchell, 2010; Ker-Lindsay, 2015; Kyris, 2018). Any such engagement from the EU was theorized to diminish sponsor-dependence while also promoting alignment with Western values in spaces such as North Cyprus, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia, among others. EWR has been reified at least within the frame of the EU through the European Court of Human Rights decisions to not contravene international laws or UN Security Council resolutions calling for not recognizing North Cyprus and has been invoked to provide North Cyprus with money for updating infrastructure as well as to help the security forces of RoC and North Cyprus to coordinate and tackle over 1,000 cases of cross-border crimes (Hadjigeorgiou, 2024). Can EWR be invoked to gradually reduce physical borderings and help transform political narratives from conflict-sustaining to peace-oriented ones? Or can EWR even be effectively invoked?

In general, borders and border walls are recognized as the epicenter of borderscapes (Brambilla & Jones, 2020). Borderscapes emphasize the ever-evolving nature of borders and borderings while emphasizing that beyond territorial lines and barriers, borderings involve the creation of a culture that upholds such walls as well as us vs. them dynamics (Konrad & Szary, 2022). They also emphasize that media, educational institutions, and other social establishments self-organize around the idea of a division, naturalizing the disunion. Given this, the narratives prompted by the act of bordering need to be reinforced and reified through discursive practices and by at least the majority of a society, lest the border or bordering practices are forced to change (Iossifova, 2020; Vaughan-Williams & Pisani, 2020). Indeed, the walls are not only normalized but the status quo starts depending on both the idea and the physical aspects of a division—often through the justification of borders engendering security, despite evidence to the contrary from around the world (Fontana, 2022; Gruszczak, 2010). Indeed, evidence suggests that border walls are much more potent as symbols than they are as barriers (Konrad & Szary, 2022; Scott, 2012). Borders are fonts of the traumas of past conflicts in cases such as Cyprus, where abandoned houses full of bullet holes have been left for a slow decay; where murals have been enacted to remind future generations of past grievances and to seek rightful justice; where flags, public arts, etc., are invoked to promote the respective national causes and cultures of both sides; where political theatre plays out (Georgiou, 2019; Kurki, 2020; Madsen, 2022; Ulas, 2022). Given all this, borders are polysemic and their meaning changes according to one's experiences at such borders and their interpretations thereof (Willie, 2024). As such, some approaches emphasize the liminal spaces provided at the borderlands, where narratives, identity, symbols, etc., are much more easily contested per the lack of distance from the traditional Other (Harold, 2019; Konrad & Szary, 2022). All approaches, however, recognize that borderlands produce shared and divergent affects which shape these narratives, as they are mediated through the varying emotions and

interpretations of the border as both a physical barrier and a symbolic, cultural, and even spiritual intermediary actant, in the process of bordering. Again, given the dynamic nature of borders and borderings, these emotions and meanings are subject to change over time. For the purposes of this study, I will focus on the emotional roots as well as the overall flow of currently emergent political narratives which are used to legitimize conflict in the case of Cyprus.

3. Methodology

The question of how scholars can effectively study and depict a complex social system, such as a borderscape, has been a constant source of debate within the scholarly community. Within border studies and increasingly within international relations, complexity-oriented methodologies aim to study complex systems from within by focusing on how such systems are embodied by the actors and institutions within and reflected in their vernacular practices and narratives (Willie, 2024). Given this, not only should we examine the systemic underpinnings and actors on bordermaking in Cyprus through a case study featuring narrative analysis, but we must also proceed to connect these higher-level dynamics with grassroots dynamics on the ground by an examination of everyday lives and practices of culture and meaning-making. As such, I have adopted an RNA approach to understand Cypriots' varying conceptions of self, other, and border.

For the purposes of this article's narrative/textual analysis section, I have used secondary data from extant ethnographic research (e.g., Cintio, 2013; Navaro-Yashin, 2012; Papadakis, 2005). From such research featuring interviews, I have distilled socio-political narratives and counternarratives regarding the conflict that feature bordering practices (such as otheringborder walls and embargoes/economic isolation, among others) and subsequently analyzed them through an RNA approach (Mutz & Simmons, 2022; Simmons, 2020). I also utilize textual analysis of news pieces, op-eds, etc., to provide further context to these interviews to better interpret their emotional anchors. Root narrative theory categorizes narrative threads into four such anchors: securitarian, egalitarian, libertarian, and dignitarian (Simmons, 2020). As defined by Simmons (2020), securitarian narratives emphasize the need for social and physical guarantees for a good life and paint the narrative's chosen villain as a direct threat to these goals. They also tend to praise the nation-state or other mechanisms that protect "the people" from violent threats. This category is pertinent to the Cypriot conflict as both sides suffer from varying security dilemmas, which I will elaborate on later in the article. Egalitarian narratives concern themselves with the domination of the few/elites over a majority; this narrative may also target any rule of law that is seen to maintain distributive injustices and praise grassroots movements. Libertarian narratives, meanwhile, tend to oppose egalitarian ones as they emphasize individual freedom and rights as protected by the rule of law (e.g., human rights), whereas the narrative villainizes tyrannical abuses of power by established actors or institutions in power. The dignitarian narrative acknowledges that particular subsets of people may face injustices due to perceived or real differences in the group make-up (race, gender, etc.) and villainizes the tyranny of the majority, the victimization of outgroups, and abuses of power over minorities (whether through institutions, culture, or law).

Within this context, I will likewise approach the categorization of the emergent narratives around bordering in Cyprus through these four categories. Of course, narratives may invoke multiple psychological and emotional frames simultaneously; moreover, differing interpretations of what fulfills security and dignity needs may render such narratives peace-oriented as well (e.g., ending a conflict, rather than physical

separation or defeating the other, as central to security). Therefore, I will take into consideration the potential for dual, multiple, or a hierarchy (i.e., one main frame with other supporting frames) of narrative frames. I believe that by uncovering the emotional and psychological anchors of extant narratives and the mechanics invoked therein, we can uncover at least some of the symbolic roots of bordering dynamics around which self-organized and self-sustaining, conflict-oriented feedback loops have emerged. For this purpose, I have reviewed circa 60 videos (direct interviews with locals, local experts, international experts) totaling about seven hours of published raw footage of about 35 interviewees in total. Per RNA principles, I distill the interviewees' main narratives into their components of protagonist, villain/issue, and the injustice central to the narrative. By understanding what narratives are adopted by each interviewee, we can also understand what emotions drive their chosen rhetoric of the border and the conflict: Securitarian narratives are driven by fear, and dignitarian narratives are driven by feelings of injustice, wherein emotions of distrust, disgust, disappointment, and anger can intertwine.

We can then proceed not only with narrative interventions (of which there are many and which are clearly not enough on their own, hence conflict intractability) but also with the work of promoting a transformation of key symbols. In addition, I have conducted an exhaustive review of existing ethnographic studies of Cyprus and will focus on what these studies reveal about the subjective interpretations of the borderings (the border itself, divisions among Cypriots, politics of conflict, etc.) and what such interpretations' implications have the potential to legitimize conflict and/or peace.

4. Case Study

The Cypriot conflict has been ongoing for over five decades since the Turkish military operation (invasion/occupation or peace operation depending on the narrative) of 1974. To sustain such a seemingly stable status quo, many self-sustaining and mutually reinforcing feedback loops need to have been established. Indeed, one can expect that much of regular social institutions and interactions have self-organized around this presumed reality in ways that benefit them. Quite apparent beneficiaries are nationalist parties that score at least 30% of the vote based simply on conflict-perpetuating rhetoric (over any policy), as well as the plunder elite in North Cyprus who have obtained and distributed Greek Cypriot properties as war loot (Bryant & Hatay, 2020; Ulas, 2017,pp. 233–318). Others who play spoiler roles to conflict resolution depend on the space remaining outside of international law—as a grey space—and can include war criminals (including the plunder elite who would otherwise be held to account), smugglers (of both drugs and historical artifacts), and money launderers, among others (Özdemir, 2025). These actors are naturally positioned—whether through enjoying the system's benefits or through choice—to attempt to perpetuate the extant conflict as well as the frozen nature of the dispute. Turkey, meanwhile, is seen as benefiting from the de facto control of Northern Cypriot territories, which Turkey is thought to utilize as a permanent military base as well as an economic investment site for Turkish-owned casino businesses. Additionally, Turkey has transferred a significant amount of Turkish settlers to the island in the post-partition era and has encouraged the change of ownership of highly beneficial industries (tourism and casino tourism) and the privatization of central industries (water, electricity) to Turkish businesses (Alipour & Vughaingmeh, 2010; Haklai & Loizides, 2015; Navaro-Yashin, 2006). Therefore, Turkey is hypothesized to be an attractor for maintaining the status quo of no permanent solution, and if so, would likely spoil peace processes that undermine their military and economic interests (Elcil, 2025; Özdemir, 2025).

It is also important to note that the UN Security Council Resolutions 541 and 550 of 1983 call for respecting the territorial integrity of the RoC and condemn any secessionist actions. While reinforcing the rule of law on the island, the resolutions further complicate an already complex border. State sovereignty and territorial integrity being attractors unto themselves, they also reduce the menu of choices for how and when people of unrecognized states can be interacted with and what opportunities they may be afforded. Together with the suspension of the *acquis communaire* in the North by the EU until a political (with emphasis) solution may be reached, these international decisions shape the Cypriot socio-political landscape, creating another attractor that stabilizes the conflict system for better or worse. The exact effect continues to be under dispute by scholars to date.

Importantly, from an emotion/narrative perspective, Cypriots on both sides of the divide suffer heavily from chosen traumas (Volkan, 1998, Chapter 3). Such traumas are based on real grievances. One such grievance is the loss of life on both sides, though Greek Cypriots focus on the Turkish Invasion of 1974, whereas Turkish Cypriots focus on intercommunal violence from 1963 to 1974. Another grievance is of forced displacement and loss of property for Greek Cypriots, and isolations that are seen as unjust for Turkish Cypriots, among others. Indeed, depredation (which created a plunder elite in the North; Ulas, 2021) and deprivation theories may well explain the historical roots of grievances in Cyprus; yet, they fail to account for why such grievances are so prevalent in conflict protraction. However, chosen traumas addressed this gap, where the term chosen here aptly refers to the fact that both communities strategically and rhetorically choose to remember only certain episodes in a certain way that maintains their narratives of *us as victims*, *they as villains*. Therefore, chosen traumas also help maintain enemy images, cause differentiation and dehumanization, and promote time collapse where historical grievances are felt as freshly as if they were occurring now (Volkan, 1998, Chapters 3–6). This psychological outlook then colors how people perceive/remember the history of the conflict, what they prefer as potential solutions and how they interpret any such solution, and their needs for security and how they may be fulfilled, among others. Most significantly, these differing chosen traumas are seemingly connected to the gulf between the two communities' interpretations of and expectations from an eventual bizonal, bicommunal federation where Greek Cypriots expect a strong central government with no limitations to mobility and living areas as well as no outside military, whereas Turkish Cypriots expect a weak central government, ethnolinguistically separated zones for living, and Turkish guarantees to be continued. These are not simply negotiating positions to be reconciled; clearly, the psychological dimension to this conflict needs to be addressed—hence the intractability of the conflict and its resistance to solely political resolution attempts (Ongel, 2024).

As outlined above, hegemonic politics and narratives thereof are steeped in the maintenance of the status quo and therefore of a cold conflict. Meanwhile, both the RoC and the TRNC naturally also have dissenters within the ranks—those who defy hegemonic discourses by producing counternarratives and those who are attempting to alter the system, the resistors. However, their motivations appear to be more economic than they are about liberation or defiance of extant hegemonies, although, of course, the economic system is tied to and constrained by the political, whereby desires to change economic realities often translates by necessity into a defiance of the political system as a whole (Antonsich, 2013; Ilican, 2013). Furthermore, groups and events such as protests adopting anti-hegemonic counternarratives are ill-attended and do not yet have a widening outreach or impact. Overall, all these actors are dependent on utilizing the border and border walls as an intermediary actant through which to legitimize or defy the status quo, such as with the Occupy Buffer Zone protests where a small group of youth activists occupied buildings left in the UN-administered Buffer

Zone in protest of the island's illegal division; or with references to Cyprus for Cypriots in the latest bout of protests in the North. The question for this case study, then, is: What effects does the border engender as an actant through which the above-mentioned actors—and any others, such as Turkey—establish networks and feedback loops used to (de)legitimize the conflict-oriented status quo, which is often labeled *no war, no peace*?

The main and most apparent function of a hardened, securitized border is physical separation. Having been established in 1964 in a UN response to intercommunal violence, the Green Line that bisected Nicosia then was lengthened to divide the whole island because of Turkey's military intervention of 1974, purportedly to stop a Greek military coup on the island as well as to stem intercommunal violence. Consequently, there was a population exchange between the RoC and North Cyprus, consolidating a virtually complete ethno-religious and linguistic separation. Meanwhile, the TRNC unilaterally declared statehood only in 1983 in contravention of international customary law, citing a failure of peace talks and rendering the island's division semi-permanent. The peace talks, starting from 1964 and lasting to date, have all failed with only a framework agreement underlining the eventual adoption of a bizonal, bicommunal federation—reminiscent of the Belgian model—being reached. In 2003, the gates between the two sides started being opened, allowing for Cypriots and tourists to visit both sides of the island and for Cypriots to work or shop on either side when possible. The RoC also obtained membership in the EU in 2004, right after rejecting the Annan Plan of the UN. The complex feedback loops of the conflict stem mainly from these milestones, lending further complexity to the Cypriot borderscape.

Vis-à-vis the production of hegemonic narratives of the Cypriot borderlands, in the short-term, the physical division and thus the two communities' separation provided an end to conflict and thus safety, which allowed for the securitization of the border, i.e., the idea that the border provided a strong enough barrier against a continuation of the militarized/violent portion of the conflict. This promoted wall-dependence (Çaykent, 2010; Ozcelik, 2013) in the longer term and allowed for the essentialization of the security discourse around the border (Adamides, 2020; Koktsidis, 2024; Loizides, 2015). Simultaneous to the securitization discourse, ethno-nationalist discourses of identity have also emerged. These two narrative systems co-vary to perpetuate the "no war, no peace" dynamic in the RoC. Meanwhile, together with ethno-nationalism, what has emerged in Northern Cyprus is a narrative that fuses securitarian and dignitarian thinking with an emphasis on deserving and therefore needing parity in status with the majority who identify as Greek/Greek-speaking Cypriots, as well as a need to maintain ties with Turkey for security against a potential tyranny of the majority. In the next few paragraphs, I will outline through which mechanisms these narratives emerge and are sustained and how they center around borderings in Cyprus.

The security narrative (intertwined with narratives of identity) revolves around *the Other as threat* as the central mechanic. Otherization was, in the first place, facilitated by the hard border and complete division of the island from 1974 to 2003. On the one hand socio-political narratives in the RoC—reinforced by both media and history education—revolve around the idea that Turkey alone is responsible for the woes of Cyprus and that Turkey is militarily occupying Northern Cyprus which creates the image of a hyper-militarized North (Cyprus Mail, 2016, 2024; "Cyprus' weapons against Turkey are diplomacy and law," 2020). This vein of narrative downplays the effects of the intercommunal strife between Turkish and Greek Cypriots on the former, who suffered ghettoization (e.g., mass displacement), extreme poverty, and structural violence through such as debasing policing or disappearances at checkpoints. Furthermore, it externalizes all blame to the chosen *Other*, which, by itself, is a conflict-perpetuating mythos that anchors a victim mentality. Importantly, these physically

reinforced mental borderings position Turkishness as alien and as imposed through conquest because Turkey is cast as a conqueror, which naturally alienates any/all Turkish Cypriots who feel cultural or ethnic kinship with Turkey (even if they mainly identify as Cypriot).

Together, these dynamics legitimize the perpetuation of the conflict in the RoC by promoting two attitudes: no compromise with the Other and an over-perception of threat from the Other, engendering insecurity and creating emotions such as anxiety, anger, confusion, fear, and disgust. The responses towards the Annan Plan provide a good example here of unwillingness to compromise, where many Greek Cypriots responded with questioning why they should make concessions on (even temporary) restrictions to residency, on property return issues (tied to ancestral territoriality), or on Turkey maintaining even a small, symbolic military force on the island (Bucik, 2012; CypriotPeacemaker, n.d.; Pericleous, 2009; "Why did Greek Cypriots reject the Annan Plan," n.d.). Meanwhile, the Greek Cypriot narratives around border crossings demonstrate the systemic success in priming the polity towards over-perceiving threats as well as the negative implications of the social action of border-crossing. Indeed, many express perceiving danger from the frequent—and wholly intentional on the Northern pseudo-authorities' part—display of Turkish flags, the image of Atatürk (the founder of modern-day Turkey), and machine gun-toting guards (Papadakis, 2005; Soriano & Yalon, 2017; Webster & Timothy, 2006). For example, Georgiou (2019, p. 97) quotes a song by local artist Ioannidis: "And I saw uprooted people crossing the line/For a cheap whore or for casinos or cigars." Meanwhile, Cintio (2013, p. 274) argues that the walls in Cyprus "created an illusion of danger that [does] not exist," while Michael (2009, p. 187) argues that the "separation and threat perception created a bipolar siege mentality" which together undermine intercommunal peacebuilding efforts. They also further express a fear normalizing the occupation of the North, i.e., of inadvertently contributing to an implied recognition of the secessionist entity in the North, being morally opposed to contributing to the economic prosperity of an illegal state, and being outraged at the existence of a border or the requirement by Northern Cyprus for passport checks(aceraspire8920, 2023; Professor-Levant, 2024). This also goes to demonstrate that the idea of embodied borders is pertinent in Cyprus—People feel their bodies bear the brunt of reifying or defying existing borderings when exerting personal agency regarding their desired location.

The border is perceived as not only illegitimate but also perpetuating an illegitimate division and being a synecdoche of the past suffering, almost like a theater or a museum (Cintio, 2013; Georgiou, 2019). This then orients the Greek Cypriot narrative towards the past, memorializing it, ritualizing it, and bemoaning historical grievances rather than being future-oriented. These attitudes are also naturally conflict-perpetuating and are a result of the borderings derived from the Turkish intervention and then chosen to be emphasized by both the state and the polity. Furthermore, this lack of legitimacy of the border is transferred to anyone who is attempting to cross from North to South without proper papers. While generally not problematic, the issue becomes one of international norms when directed towards asylum-seekers. The RoC has claimed that the Buffer Zone provides for a state of exception where its humanitarian obligations to refugees can be suspended, for they are attempting to infiltrate by coming through an illegal port of entry (i.e., the North). In this vein, the RoC has engaged in refoulements as well as pushbacks, but most starkly, they have caged tens of migrants in the Buffer Zone, which forced the United Nations Forces in Cyprus to set up shanty refugee camps for those stuck in between (Connelly, 2021; Kitsantonis, 2024). Referring back to the hegemonic conflict narrative, the RoC has posited the idea that Turkey is encouraging Muslim migrants to infiltrate the RoC and therefore that migration is a weapon of conflict which should be defended against, thus triggering the fears that anchor the Greek Cypriot

securitarian narrative. Meanwhile, the migrants targeted by the narrative are thus forced to embody the perceived illegitimacy of the border as well as the established conflict narratives that perpetuate the division of the island. Overall, then, the Greek Cypriot narrative is driven mostly by fear.

The hegemonic Northern Cypriot political narrative differs from its RoC counterpart in significant ways. In this vein, the original Cypriot conflict—i.e., the violent phase—was ended in 1974 through the Turkish intervention/invasion. Even the Turkish Cypriots who problematize the Turkish policy of military occupation of Northern Cyprus, exporting settlers to Cyprus, and of increasingly direct interventions into the Turkish Cypriot democratic processes, imagine 1974 as an endpoint. The conflict is argued to have originated in the intercommunal strife of 1963–1974, where the issues were existential; post-1974, the issue transformed into a political one. While some Turkish Cypriots recognize the grievances of the Greek Cypriot community regarding mass violence, displacement, loss of property, etc., of 1974, many justify or at least (have been taught to) perceive such atrocities as being the punishment or the unfortunate result for their community's suffering since 1963. Therefore, their hegemonic narrative revolves around the core theme that Turkish Cypriots are victims who have unjustly been isolated from the international markets/community by the erstwhile villains of their story. Given these dynamics, the Turkish Cypriot hegemonic narrative centers a quest for deserved/promised political parity—despite being the minority in Cyprus, with Greek Cypriots being the majority—and ensuring their political will and survival through Turkish guarantees. The "villain" here, then, is the power imbalance between the majority and minority, which should be adjudicated through Turkish backing and the provision of assurances regarding current and future political status/authority.

The border here is perceived as a legitimate barrier ensuring physical safety and political independence—and thus status parity—against the majority. Turkey's presence as a guarantor is welcomed insofar as providing security, but its interference in local politics and its extractions from the local economy are shunned. Therefore, the lack of a proper border between Turkey and North Cyprus, where the citizens of the former can freely travel to the latter with just their ID cards, is more of an issue than the presence of the walls bisecting the island within the Turkish Cypriot narrative framework. Overall, the Turkish Cypriot hegemonic narrative of politics emphasizes a need for status/power with both the RoC and Turkey. Nonetheless, Turkish Cypriots denote that "our people [are] becoming hopeless about the future. We are forced to live in a closed box. Turkey is the only 'window' for us opening to the rest of the world" (Altinay et al., 2002, p. 179), demonstrating that while Turkish Cypriots may prefer some distancing with Turkey for cultural security, their economic and physical security needs are fulfilled by a proximity to Turkey as well. Furthermore, regarding their understanding of current Cypriot society as well as their imagining of the future, they imagine themselves as peers of the Greek Cypriot community rather than an ethno-linguistic minority among a Greek Cypriot majority. The current "president" of North Cyprus, as well as Turkish President Erdogan and his Foreign Minister Cavusoglu have claimed that they refuse the "perception that Turkish Cypriots [are a] minority" ("We disregard perception," 2021), asserting that the community "has never been a minority" (Guldogan, 2023). This dignitarian approach emphasizing the need for equality, recognition from the other and status/power seems to drive much of Turkish Cypriot imagination of the border, one that gives them, through the status quo, the ability to exercise self-determination (which they believe is legitimate) and which serves as a bargaining chip to obtain concessions from Greek Cypriots regarding the island's future. Overall, then, the dignitarian narrative legitimizes the border much as with the case of the securitarian narrative. Here, then, the emotions that anchor the Turkish Cypriot narrative are those of ambition for powers and status to which they may feel but are not necessarily entitled. Such narratives are clearly also in a direct clash with the Greek Cypriot understanding of the Cypriot communities being

in a majority–minority relationship within a larger Cypriot national ethos and of needing more centralized governance to feel the system is just and secure.

Importantly, Turkish Cypriots are more skeptical about the potential of living together with Greek Cypriots due to the latter's assigned villain role in the former's hegemonic understanding of the division's history, whereas the Greek Cypriot narrative focuses on Turkey as the main villain (Interpeace, 2010). The latter narrative, while promoting more hope about future coexistence, discounts Turkish Cypriot agency as well as their concerns, assuming or at least implying either that such concerns will not matter in a unified Cyprus or that a future government can deal with minority concerns easily. Indeed, Greek Cypriot politicians generally argue that "the people," i.e., Cypriots, can reach a solution as soon as Turkey leaves the island ("Anastasiadis," 2025). However, even the progressive leaders of North Cyprus perceive the Greek Cypriot approach as lacking much-needed empathy for and understanding of Turkish Cypriots' wants/needs and have argued that ignoring internal issues by externalizing all Cypriot problems to Turkey only undermines any peace process ("Akıncı'dan Anastasiadis'e cevap," 2025). Additionally, despite the extent to which Turkey is narratively villainized, the Turkish Cypriots are economically and physically dependent on it, making it inevitable for Turkey to have a role in peacebuilding in Cyprus. As such, the way the relationship between the Cypriots and the Turkish (and thus, Turkish Cypriots who identify with a Turkish ethnicity as well) is defined (i.e., as villains/conquerors or as a key cultural component) will be instrumental to reconcile the different Cypriot narratives. For example, in one recent protest against the Turkish occupation in North Cyprus, students led with chants such as "Turks, you will die on Greek soil" and "Turks, Mongols, murderers" (Cyprus Mail, 2018), the latter chant tying Turkey to the Greek Cypriot narrative of indigenous resistance against constant occupation and pressure from larger outside forces. Can narratives of Greekness and anti-Turkey villanization be reconciled with a narrative of kinship with and dependence on Turkey? This appears unlikely at the moment, but achieving such a feat is clearly necessary for the success of future peacebuilding efforts.

Nonetheless, due to their own narrative orientations to and from the border, Greek and Turkish Cypriots have differing expectations of a potential solution. On the one hand, Greek Cypriots prefer a unitary government, no restrictions on land ownership, and the total withdrawal of Turkey from the island (Interpeace, 2010). Turkish Cypriots, meanwhile, hope for a loose federation, perpetuation of territorial distinctions, and Turkey still providing for their military security (Interpeace, 2010). Most significantly, both Greek and Turkish Cypriots believe the status quo is preferable to the alternatives proposed by the other side (Interpeace, 2010). There are two reasons for these disparities and the resultant conflict-orientation on the island: Firstly, the border stabilizes and normalizes the division of the island, thus legitimizing policies which hold out for a win over any compromise. Secondly, Cypriot borderings have led to otherization whereby there is a lack of trust regarding the goodwill of the other side—Neither polity believes the other would willingly accept their preferred solution (Interpeace, 2010).

5. Analysis and Conclusions

Cyprus provides a country where an internal division has long been normalized and a frozen conflict is perpetuated. Such normalization implies the idea that the division is intractable by nature. These dynamics of bordering have significant implications for the emergent political narratives and machinations in Cyprus.

First, the island's relative calm after its bisection creates an illusion of stability and safety for all parties involved. This perception legitimizes conflict-oriented approaches as both sides expect—and therefore hold out for—an eventual win: a centralized, powerful federation for Greek Cypriots and a looser, less-centralized bizonal federation or even a recognition of secession for Turkish Cypriots. Furthermore, the bordering processes self-legitimize at the same time: If they can provide safety as intended, the border walls can be considered successful regardless of other, unintended consequences. Second, both Greek and Turkish Cypriots feel the weight of embodying the Cypriot borderings (Demetriou, 2016). Therefore, they must reconcile their personal space, narratives, and emotions with their territorial politics. This creates a significant feedback loop: Those adopting the hegemonic narrative should either not cross or they should not necessarily trust the other. Subsequently, cross-cutting bonds are not created or reinforced among a majority of the populations, which leads to a lack of empathy and cooperation. In turn, the absence of these factors legitimizes the initial conflict-oriented decisions and everyday, conflict-perpetuating routines while engendering and legitimizing other conflict-oriented actions. Therefore, the two "states" in Cyprus unsurprisingly utilized Covid-19 and the migration crisis in Cyprus as legitimizing factors for hardening borders when given the chance.

Third, the Cypriot border appears to be the locus of negotiations over temporality. Not only do Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots "remember" the Cypriot conflict's timeline quite differently, but these communities also have differing temporal orientations. Indeed, while Greek Cypriots focus on obtaining redress for grievances located in 1974, Turkish Cypriots' main concerns revolve around the perceived injustices they are currently suffering from. As one interviewee declares, Turkish Cypriots are "like air," whereas Greek Cypriots are "like stone" (Soriano & Yalon, 2017). This means that their temporal orientations have engendered differing and possibly incompatible attitudes and characteristics vis-à-vis addressing political aims. This chasm between the two communities can then cause the polity to talk across each other, resulting in the perception that they suffer from a lack of intercommunal understanding and empathy, and thus legitimizing conflict-orientation once again. Indeed, it is important to realize that the ways in which the two communities' hegemonic narratives have conceptualized the border and, in so doing, legitimized the conflict are significantly different. The Greek Cypriot narratives reveal fear-driven security concerns, whereas the main Turkish Cypriot narrative is aspirational and dignitarian. Peacebuilding is unlikely to be productive without reconciling these narratives and their legitimation of the division, the status quo, and thus the conflict in Cyprus. Increased EWR efforts in North Cyprus to help better align local values and practices with those of the RoC and the EU and to help empower burgeoning Europeanist or Cypriotist anti-hegemonic groups may be helpful. The impact could be redoubled when coupled with more direct attention paid to promoting positive intercommunal interactions and promoting open dialogue about identities and eventual resolutions outside of civil society organizations, NGOs, and elite-level politics.

Finally, this case study demonstrates the pertinence of discursive narrative framings, emotions, affects, and practices vis-à-vis conflictuality, securitization, and peacebuilding success in the borderlands. Such everyday factors possess significant direct and indirect impacts on geopolitical rivalries as well as their ultimate resolutions. Usually disregarded as "only anthropological" and less important to larger concerns, the "vernacular" and "everyday" have been a blind spot to traditional international relations approaches that focus on matters of geopolitics, diplomacy, and military. However, this article asserts that the blind spot is deadly towards diplomatic and peacebuilding efforts across conflictual borderlands and argues that the separation of everyday matters from elite-level diplomacy is artificial. In future efforts for engaging border

conflicts, diplomats and peacebuilders must pay equal emphasis to the vernacular as to the official politics and negotiations.

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Conflict of Interests

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