CHAPTER 4

The Opening of the Checkpoints and the Unfulfilled Potential

The opening of the checkpoints in April 2003 was the single most important development in recent Cypriot history and inter-communal relations since 1974. The opening of the first checkpoint on the Ledra Palace street marked a moment of truth, a point in history at which Cyprus ‘came of age’, with the Greek Cypriot population gaining access to the northern part and the Turkish Cypriot population gaining access to the southern...
part. Expectedly, a part of both the Greek Cypriot and the Turkish Cypriot population were and still are opposed to the opening of the checkpoints and refuse to cross them. This section of the population, which although substantial is still a minority, served as the political basis and as the social legitimation for using the virus Covid-19 crisis as an opportunity to ‘temporarily’ close the checkpoints and forbid all crossings in mid-March 2020.

However, back in 2003, there was a massive mobilisation on both sides, the sheer size and intensity of which were unprecedented. This movement continued for months on end and succeeded in consolidating a new situation, the order of the open checkpoints, to the Cypriot reality. The 2003–2005 period saw the opening of checkpoints at five different points along the ceasefire line, which have been incorporated into the Green Line Regulation that came into effect with the accession of the Republic of Cyprus to the European Union in 2004 and have been socially and legally established since. The checkpoint openings have also become a major aspect of the Cyprus dispute, with the staunchest supporters of partition calling for the closure of open checkpoints and the avoidance of any future openings.\(^1\) Although the closure of the checkpoints in 2020 was termed temporary and only made possible through the appeal to and use of the public health crisis provoked by global pandemic Covid-19, the process through which this was done revealed yet once more the social dynamics of partition politics. A note on the facts and the ideological repercussions of this, at the time of writing an ongoing story, is made towards the end of this chapter.

\(^1\) Resistance to the opening of new checkpoints started around 2007 and was strongly expressed during the opening of the Ledra Street checkpoint in 2008 and the Limnitis checkpoint in 2009 by Christofias and Talat. The next checkpoints to open were those in Deryneia and Apliki as late as November 2018. It was a significant delay as their opening had already been agreed upon by Nicos Anastasiades and Mustafa Akinci back in 2015. Since 2008, concurrently (and linked) with the sharp rise of the far right, certain people have been calling for the closure of the open checkpoints. In recent years, the far right has been holding events at the checkpoints on various occasions, thereby causing a de facto closure if only for a few minutes, a stance that is seemingly tolerated by the police. In addition to the National Popular Front (ELAM), others who have at times spoken in favour of checkpoint closure include the president of DIKO Nikolas Papadopoulos and EDEK under President Sizopoulou. It has also been leaked that President Anastasiades allegedly discussed this possibility with his advisors in early 2018. See Kakouris, G. (2018) Η ενδιαφέρουσα στρατηγική του Συμβουλίου Αρχηγών [The strategy of the Leaders’ Council], Politis (22/2/2018) http://politis.com.cy/article/achtarmas-protaseon-sto-simvoulio-archigon
The Crack in the Wall

The wall or separating line that was drawn between the Greek Cypriot and the Turkish Cypriot section in Nicosia and was then adopted for other cities is a product of the first wave of inter-communal violence (1958) and was consolidated after the second wave (1963). The Green Line that cuts the city of Nicosia in half was designed on 30 December 1963 by a British officer as a temporary ceasefire line that would keep the armed groups of the two communities apart. Following the 1974 war and the population displacements, Nicosia retained its divided status and has since been the only segregated city in Cyprus. However, the ceasefire line expanded from East to West, dividing the Cypriot territory into two parts, with a buffer, demilitarised zone of several kilometres in the middle.

In Nicosia, the buffer or neutral zone was extremely narrow, with outposts situated only a few metres across from each other in certain places. Although the military presence was reduced since the early 1990s following a bilateral agreement about ‘partial withdrawal’ and closure of certain outposts, it took two more decades for the old Nicosia to finally dissociate itself from its militarised area image and for the city crowds to stop avoiding and ignoring the area. The checkpoint opening on the Ledra Palace street in April 2003 and particularly the opening on the commercial Ledra street in the old town centre in 2008 contributed to the transformation of the historic centre of Nicosia. More significantly, the opening of the checkpoints had a major impact on inter-communal relations, reshaping popular perceptions about Cyprus and the Cyprus dispute.

Prior to 2003, contacts between Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots were rare, with most of them taking place either abroad or at Ledra Palace or Pyla. Most of these were organised and usually fell under the umbrella of various conflict-resolution international initiatives that focused on the younger generation. Others were initiatives of AKEL and its organisations

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2 Panicos Chrysanthou’s recent film *The Story of the Green Line* vividly conveys this experience of proximity to the ceasefire line that has been experienced by many thousands of soldiers and civilians in Nicosia for the past 45 years.

3 In May 1989, 20 Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot activists and scholars were invited by the Education Institution for Democracy and Environmental Protection to participate in a three-day discussion in Berlin—an initiative that paved the way for future meetings. See participant Christina Valanidou’s interview in the official PEO magazine *Ergasia*, no. 5 (July 1989). Since then, attempts at inter-communal contacts involving political parties and civil society organisations in Cyprus have been somewhat more frequent, and an attempt for the founding of a Movement for an Independent and Federal Cyprus began.
held in collaboration with left-wing parties and organisations of the Turkish Cypriot community. Although already by the late 1990s a small movement in favour of rapprochement had been formed, it did not succeed in playing a major role and remained largely peripheral. Nevertheless, it was important for a small minority of Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots who participated in it and for their milieu, insofar as this movement kept the idea of reunification alive and passed the torch of this idea to the next generation.4

The attempts at inter-communal contacts prior to 2003 were significant for another reason. Those early attempts called attention, at least for those participating in them, to the present set of circumstances and the difficulties of this endeavour. As well as allowing to a small portion of the Cypriot population to see first-hand and for the first time what was happening in the other community on a socio-political level, beyond the tampered images of state-controlled and, at any rate, insufficient media information, these attempts also brought into prominence the reactions of the nationalist factions of the two communities towards any contact between Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots.5 In northern Cyprus, the Turkish Cypriot left was incapable of playing a pivotal role in politics, whereas the Greek Cypriot left, despite being comparatively more powerful, was also marginalised for the greater part of the 1990s, at which time the Greek Cypriot community was experiencing a new surge of nationalism.

At the time, rapprochement supporters were confronted with a very hostile climate and were subjected to verbal abuse and slander. There were also incidents of violence, most of them in the Turkish Cypriot community, although a few also happened in the Greek Cypriot community.6 Furthermore, there was something almost comical in the meetings

4 The publication of the first bilingual, bicommmunal magazine Χάτε/Hade (1998–2001), a commendable effort, was cancelled after just five issues, given that readership was not sufficient enough to sustain it.
5 For an account of women initiatives in this period and the external as well as internal difficulties peace activists faced see Cockburn 2004.
6 The climax of those violent incidents, happening primarily on the Greek Cypriot side, occurred at the Sakis Rouvas - Burak Kut ‘Peace Concert’ in 1997. Organised by the United Nations and approved by both the Turkish Cypriot leadership and the Republic of Cyprus, the concert was held at the Çetinkaya stadium inside the buffer zone. Far-right groups subsequently transformed Nicosia into a war zone, preventing several people from reaching the concert venue, and scuffling with the police. This incident arguably marks the only time that Molotov bombs were ever thrown in Cyprus (far-right groups were the culprit). Furthermore, the Adouloti Kyrenia Association and other anti-federal organisations linked
held at *kafeneia* (coffee houses) in the mixed village of Pyla, an area with a rather singular political/legal status: the presence of undercover police officers from both sides, sitting in tables next to the mixed population of Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots who were doing mostly small talk, was far from being discreet. Proponents of rapprochement were reminded that what they were doing was, if nothing else, suspicious.

Although the climate was somewhat improved in the early 2000s, following a string of debacles—the supposed Pan-National Conference (a conference to be held by all Greek and Greek Cypriot political parties to decide the nation’s policy), the Unified Defence Doctrine (stipulating that Greece and Greek Cypriot-controlled Cyprus were a unified space in military terms), the motorcyclist ordeal and the S-300 missiles that would allegedly shift power correlations⁷ amidst the accession process of the Republic of Cyprus to the European Union—in reality no dramatic changes occurred. Rapprochement was still deemed acceptable by the northern and southern governments, although in practice said governments tolerated or even supported nationalist rants within the education system and mass media, as well as tolerating and supporting tactics of procrastination through state apparatuses with a view to complicating, marginalising and delegitimising all inter-communal contacts. Of course, inter-communal contacts increased as the UN and international players showed a great interest in projects promoting contact and collaboration between Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots. On a political level, the Clerides-Denktas talks were moving forward to such an extent that the UN, under Kofi Annan, decided for the first time to take the next step by submitting a draft for the solution of the Cyprus dispute. This draft would have to be finalised by the two leaders and approved for implementation concurrently with the scheduled accession of Cyprus to the EU. Rauf Denktas’ refusal, however, to follow the path opened to him by the UN and the European prospect brought seismic shifts in the Turkish Cypriot
to the archbishopric held an anti-concert/protest concert on Eleftherias Square that was broadcast live by Logos Television, the official broadcasting media outlet of the Orthodox Church of Cyprus.

⁷ The Pan-National conference never actually took place; the Unified Defence Doctrine never even succeeded in landing a single military aircraft on the Andreas Papandreou airbase, an extension of the Paphos International Airport; the S-300 missiles were paid for but delivered to Crete instead of Cyprus as a result of Turkey’s pressure; the ‘active volcano’ policy that would supposedly compel the international community to intervene for the solution of the Cyprus dispute simply resulted in the two aforementioned casualties during the motorcyclists’ protest in 1996.
community. Within a community that was already in turmoil due to the preceding banking crisis and with the possibility of a solution to the Cyprus dispute and by extension the European prospect for the Turkish Cypriots receding on account of Rauf Denktaş’s intransigence, a wave of protests erupted which soon became massive.8

Turkey was also going through tremendous changes at the time, as the newly elected government of the moderate Islamist Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP) placed more emphasis on Turkey’s European prospect and for the first time seemed clearly positively inclined to a federalist solution for the Cyprus dispute. The government was thus at odds with nationalist Kemalist circles within the army, vying with them for power.9 To be sure, Rauf Denktaş tried to gain support from powers of the nationalist deep state of Turkey, on whose help he had relied throughout his entire political career; his efforts were to no avail though.10 The movement of large numbers of people under the ‘This country is ours’ platform now explicitly opposed Denktaş, his policies and the legacy he had bequeathed in the form of a second Turkish state in Cyprus.

THE INVASION OF REALITY

Amidst these circumstances, Rauf Denktaş made the decision to open the checkpoints after consulting with the Turkish government.11 The Greek Cypriot side and Tassos Papadopoulos’ then newly elected government

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8 Dimitriou T. and Vlachos S. (2007) Betrayed Revolt. Προδομένη Εξέγερση Νicosia: Sosialistiki Ekfrasi.

9 Anagnostopoulou A. (2004) Turkish Modernisation – Islam and Turkish Cypriots in the Labyrinthine Path of Kemalism Τουρκικός εκσυγχρονισμός – Ισλάμ και Τουρκοκύπριοι στη δαιδαλώδη διαδρομή του κεμαλισμού Athens: Vivliorama. Tahsin E. (2012) ‘Making sense of Turkey’s changing Cyprus policy: The EU factor and the shifting preferences of the power bloc’ in Trimikliniotis N. and Bozkurt U. (eds.) Beyond a Divided Cyprus: a State and Society in Transformation. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 135–150.

10 For his systematic and detailed efforts during the whole period see the diaries of this retired diplomat. Lindahl, I. (2019) Notes from the Graveyard of Diplomats: Cyprus 2002–2004, Nicosia: Heterotopia Publications

11 Ahmet Cavit An, an active proponent of rapprochement since the 1980s, had just been vindicated at the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR), where he had pled his case, being deprived of the right to organise the Movement for an Independent and Federal Cyprus due to restrictions to his freedom of movement. The ECHR ruled in his favour, a decision that had been issued barely a month before, on 2 February 2003. According to
were taken aback. The first few months after the opening of the checkpoints (initially the Ledra Palace one, followed immediately by the Ayios Dhometios checkpoint) were marked by an ‘absent state’, a fact which enabled a process of subjectivation, as large crowds readily crossed over to the other side.\textsuperscript{12} It was remarkable how effortlessly and abruptly the ideological construct of absolute partition was demolished in this manner, together with the culture of fear that went along with it in those first few months after the opening, much to the embarrassment of both leaderships. Thousands of Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots would cross the checkpoints daily on foot, entering that part of their country from which they had been deprived for three decades, in the process of ignoring the official narrative about the brutality rampant in the other side, the dangers they would face from the enemy and their need for protection. The crossing of the Turkish Cypriots was largely to be expected and to a great degree followed the logic of the massive protests that had preceded it. After all, the Turkish Cypriot population retained a number of rights in the Republic of Cyprus, of which they technically remained citizens, and in the period following the opening they obtained all necessary papers.\textsuperscript{13}

The massive movement of the Greek Cypriot population towards the ‘occupied territories’ was a remarkable response to the movement of the Turkish Cypriots, the latter being essentially the driving force behind the opening of the checkpoints in the first place. It was a form of ‘silent revolution’ on behalf of the majority of Greek Cypriots who visited the Turkish army-controlled territories, in defiance of the Greek Cypriot political leadership, the media and the dominant narratives, disregarding ‘dangers’ and inhibitions.\textsuperscript{14} An estimated 200,000 Greek Cypriots crossed the

\textsuperscript{12}Demetriou, O. (2007) ‘To cross or not to cross? Subjectivation and the absent state in Cyprus’, \textit{Journal of Anthropological Institute}, 13.

\textsuperscript{13}Andreas Christou, a proponent of rapprochement and prominent member of AKEL, served as Interior Minister at the time, which also accounts for how quickly the Turkish Cypriots were able to obtain their Republic of Cyprus papers.

\textsuperscript{14}Panayiotou A. (2012) ‘The unavoidable but censored wisdom of the border experience’, paper in conference ‘Though the road blocks’, Cyprus University of Technology, Limassol, 24/11/2012.
checkpoints in the first three months.\textsuperscript{15} Even though the Greek Cypriot government, political parties and mass media were all negatively disposed to the opening of the checkpoints, they could not openly admit as much. After decades of condemning the violation of the freedom of movement, it would be inconsistent for the legal state to oppose a political measure that finally allowed this right to be freely exercised.

Of course, concerns over the danger of recognising the pseudo-state were raised by many quarters, until the former Attorney General Alecos Markides clarified that states cannot be recognised by citizens; they can only be recognised by other states. More importantly, the Greek Cypriot population paid no attention to such concerns. Joy and excitement were the prevailing emotions, as thousands of displaced persons visited their former villages and were moved to tears. Their warm reception by the Turkish Cypriots, with the eldest remembering the Cypriot Greek language variety and welcoming the Greek Cypriots also played its part in quickly reversing the social climate. Accordingly, the media also began focusing on this emotional aspect and producing endless ‘human’ stories, eschewing the platitudes and ‘recognition’ discourse with which they had initially treated the checkpoint openings.\textsuperscript{16}

Apart from the general feeling of euphoria and the potential that the opening of the checkpoints unlocked, those first few months were crucial insofar as the rationale vis-à-vis the Cyprus dispute began changing. The reality which had been repelled, instrumentalised and fragmented by regimes now came to the fore.\textsuperscript{17} For many Cypriots, this period marked the first time they met and discussed with people from the other community, bearing in mind that the partition had been in effect since 1964 and had been absolute since 1975. Cyprus suddenly expanded and assumed much greater proportions in the minds of an enormous part of the population who made the decision to cross to the other side for whatever reason. Everybody, including the elderly who had memories from before the war, saw a different landscape; some places were familiar but still bore the mark of three decades of other people living in the area. This fresh contact with another part of the country and another part of the population was

\textsuperscript{15}Demetriou 2007.

\textsuperscript{16}Karayianni C. (2017) ‘Challenging the sacredness of “the mediated centre”: The shift in media discourses on bicommmunal relations in Cyprus after the crossing points opening in 2003’, in Doudaki V. and Carpentier N. (eds.) Cyprus and its Conflicts: Representations, Materialities and Cultures. NY: Berghahn Books, pp. 163–181.

\textsuperscript{17}Karayianni 2017.
spontaneous and unmediated, and was held in a disorganised, casual and unscheduled fashion; rather than taking place in a neutral, buffer zone, it happened in areas which for some Cypriots were part of their everyday lives, for others were linked with childhood memories and yet for others constituted uncharted territory.\(^{18}\) This is precisely why the impact of this contact was much greater than the relatively small contact programmes that came before.

Although the climate was extremely positive and no incidents of violence and altercation took place, as perhaps those ill-disposed to the opening were hoping, the enthusiasm gradually faded. This initial contact was not followed up on by the majority of visitors nor did it manage to establish itself as a new political stance. The state slowly but steadily reasserted itself, implemented stricter control and once again imposed its own semiotics and meanings on the space. The checkpoints soon turned into informal borders. On the Greek Cypriot side, police force was increased, customs were set up, a new status quo was consolidated and the dominant discourse was re-established. Generally speaking, the line of argument that was adopted by the media as the new, nationally acceptable attitude can be summed up as follows: The checkpoint crossing is valid for a) refugees who wish to visit their former homes and b) those going on a pilgrimage to the churches in the occupied territories. For no other reason whatsoever should Greek Cypriots cross over to the occupied territories or buy anything in those areas, lest they are considered as supporting the occupation regime.

Gradually, movement at the checkpoints began slowing down, as only a small percentage of the population would still move back and forth on a regular basis. Most people would limit themselves to a couple of visits at best. The potential for politicising this widespread enthusiasm during the opening period and using it as a fuel for mobilising people towards the reunification of Cyprus was wasted in the span of a few months. Both Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots returned to their daily routine and the political reality to which they were accustomed. The spontaneous gesture of the crossings did not prove sufficient in fostering a comprehensive ideological and political change.\(^{19}\) Nevertheless, one should not

\(^{18}\) Hadjipavlou M. (2007) ‘Multiple stories’, *Innovation: The European Journal of Social Science Research*, 20(1): 53–73.

\(^{19}\) Bryant R. (2012b) *The Past in Pieces: Belonging in the New Cyprus*. Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press.
underestimate the political significance of the checkpoint openings, as they ushered in a new historical era and were henceforward recorded in the Cypriots’ collective consciousness as a social victory, upon which the terms of the discussion, not only of the Cyprus dispute but of every discussion regarding the present and future of Cyprus, can be built.

The open checkpoints allowed many members of the two communities to build and maintain relationships post-2003. Even though the de facto partition and the political structures and ideological frameworks that remained powerful exerted and to this day still exert pressure on intercommunal contacts, it suddenly became possible to establish certain social relationships, friendships and collaborations.20 Certainly, the fundamental differences in daily life across the two communities, along with their different languages, cultural connotations and political realities, and the challenges involved in crossing from one part of the country to the other (for instance, until recently, mobile phones were not working) continue to pose difficulties and limitations.21

In those years and up to 2009 or so, northern and southern Cyprus became a huge construction site, with tens of thousands of new buildings erected, mostly in coastal areas, giving rise to a massive influx of migrants from Turkey to northern Cyprus and from Eastern European countries to southern Cyprus. At the same time, several Turkish Cypriots moved to southern Cyprus seeking employment. Many of them even joined trade unions, mostly in the left-wing PEO but some also in the right-wing SEK. In the early 2010s, the construction industry bubble burst in southern Cyprus put an end to this trend. Movement through the open checkpoints for consumption and tourism purposes continued unabated though. A number of Turkish Cypriots would visit southern Cyprus mainly in

20 Based on a recent research, only 33% of Cypriots maintain contact with the other community. Aygin E. (2018) ‘Only 33% of Cypriots have contact with the other community’, http://esraaygin.blogspot.com/2018/03/only-33-of-cypriots-have-contact-with.html

21 In the summer of 2019, a new mobile phone connection was activated, thanks to which Turkish Cypriot mobile phones can now function on the southern side and Greek Cypriot mobile phones can function on the northern side with an extra charge. A proxy server was set up in Switzerland in order to avoid the recognition controversy, with the extra charge resulting from the Swiss company’s roaming charges. As in the two checkpoints which finally opened in 2018, the Trust Building Measure had been decided many years ago and its realisation was delayed due to various reasons and obstacles. The measure was finally realised when the UN Secretary-General published a report on its good services at the UN Security Council, which, amidst fears that the Peacekeeping Force was to leave or scale down, ultimately gave a six-month extension—a fact which was probably not a coincidence.
pursuit of products they could not find in northern Cyprus, whereas several Greek Cypriots would cross over looking for lower prices—a tendency that exponentially rose in 2018 after the Turkish lira was significantly undervalued.

The more explicitly political contacts between Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots were also increased, going beyond the narrow logic of conflict resolution that had been a defining feature of the contact programmes in the previous decade. The founding of the Association for Historical Dialogue and Research which focused on training history teachers and the formation of the Turkish Cypriot and Greek Cypriot Teachers’ Platform which promoted contacts among teachers of the two communities and which occasionally organised more openly activist events and initiatives were made possible thanks to the checkpoint openings. The same thing holds true for the Cultural Centre Gardash, effectively the first bicommunal social centre which brought youths of the two communities together in a more informal manner and within a more explicitly political context.22 A few years later, the Home for Cooperation, situated at the Ledra Palace checkpoint buffer zone, was established as the main meeting point for various bicommunal activities—often formal, diplomatic, technical and cultural events, but also events of a more political and activist nature.

The movement of people and inter-communal relations were significantly boosted by the 2008 opening of the Ledra street checkpoint in the heart of walled Nicosia. In addition to the symbolic weight and practical significance of that particular opening, it should also be noted that it was the first checkpoint to open as the result of simultaneous pressures by Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots to their respective governments, which included a number of protests. While then leaders Tassos Papadopoulos and Mehmet Ali Talat had agreed in principle to the opening, it took a great deal of time for the opening to come to fruition due to practical issues. Mutual accusations of procrastination were levelled. This, in turn, led to a series of relatively small protests which did however make a public impact on both sides, with citizens demanding that their governments stop playing this blame game. Ultimately, it took Christofias’ election to presidency in 2008 and the new climate this election generated to make the opening happen. Yet, even on the opening day certain minor

22 https://nekatomata.blogspot.com/2007/11/5-2003-2007.html
altercations took place leading to the temporary closure of the checkpoint for a few hours.

The open checkpoint on Ledra street significantly increased visitors in walled Nicosia and quickly emerged as the main point of reference for the reunification movement. It also provided the space for many street events, becoming a bicomunal meeting point and, overall, a crucial hotspot for this small but increasing part of the Cypriot population who insisted on building and maintaining relationships despite the partition. When the Occupy movement made its appearance in Cyprus in 2011, the Ledra street checkpoint was naturally and almost automatically selected as the ‘occupation’ space for this youth-driven, digital and bicomunal movement, which was thus transformed into an ‘Occupy the buffer zone’ movement. On a social level, some of the local coffee shops on both sides that have been active in the last few years serve a mixed clientele. Particularly Ta Kala Kathoumena in southern Cyprus and Hoi Polloi in northern Cyprus have become haunts frequented by youths from both communities.

The Unfulfilled Potential

The opening of the checkpoints in 2003 was the single most important moment in the history of the Cyprus dispute post-1974. For the first time, the Cypriot people had the opportunity to step into the spotlight and shape the conditions of history in a manner both symbolic and practical. If the checkpoint openings were a product of the Turkish Cypriot initiative, their consolidation as perpetually open gateways connecting the two parts of the divided country resulted from their joint use by both the Turkish

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Iliopoulou E. and Karathanasis P. ‘Towards a radical politics: Grassroots urban activism in the walled city of Nicosia’, The Cyprus Review, 26(1), pp. 169–192.

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Ioannou, G. (2019) Social activism and the city: cultural sociology and radical politics in 21st Century Cyprus, The Cyprus Review, Vol. 31:1.

Karathanasis, P. (2017) Activation from Below and Exit from Liminality: Public Events and Actions in Inner City Nicosia [Από τα κάτω δραστηριοποιήσεις και έξοδος από την οριακότητα: δημόσιες εκδηλώσεις και δράσεις στην εντός των τειχών Λευκωσία], unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Aegean.

Ilican M. E. (2013) ‘The Occupy Buffer Zone Movement: Radicalism and sovereignty in Cyprus’, The Cyprus Review, 25(1): 55–78/Ilican M. E (2016) ‘Radicalising the no man’s land “The Occupy Buffer Zone” Movement in Cyprus’ in Karakatsanis L. and Papadogiannis N. (eds.), The Politics of Culture in Turkey, Greece and Cyprus: Performing the left since the 1960s. London: Routledge, pp. 249–269/Iliopoulou E. and Karathanasis P. ‘Towards a radical politics: Grassroots urban activism in the walled city of Nicosia’, The Cyprus Review, 26(1), pp. 169–192.
Cypriots and the Greek Cypriots. Having said that, I argue that the process could have further advanced at that critical moment of the opening, during those first few months in the spring of 2003. The emerging potential was never completely tapped into, as citizens did not define themselves as agents of change, allowing politicians and ultimately the state itself to retrieve the ground they had lost during those chaotic days, and also allowing them to once again enforce ‘normality’.26

Regardless, the normality that is in effect since 2003 is different than the one preceding it. In some cases, slogans and symbols that are informed by the conditions of the *status quo ante*, that is closed checkpoints, but still persistently circulate, now seem ludicrous, inasmuch as the institutions expressing them do not even have the basic intelligence to retire them. An entire generation of Cypriots has now grown up with open checkpoints—a generation that hasn’t experienced the absolute separation of the 1975–2003 period. Despite the various difficulties, limitations, shortages and discouraging factors which still hold, the movement of people back and forth was fairly steady until 2020. Despite the increasingly strong demands of several nationalist groups, closing the checkpoints is neither legally nor politically feasible unless extraordinary conditions spring up.27 Such extraordinary conditions did spring up in March 2020. In fact, Anastasiades’ government engaged in a surprise prefigurative move against the crossings in late February before the Covid-19 arrived in Cyprus precipitating developments and putting the possibility of a return to the pre-2003 situation of closed checkpoints on the table.28

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26 The ambivalence of AKEL and the weakness of the far left and liberal rapprochement forces at that key juncture was a significant factor for this.

27 November 2018 saw the first such major protest attempt by a ‘citizens’ initiative’—ELAM refrained from formally endorsing this endeavour. The initiative intended to close a different checkpoint each Sunday for a total of three hours, while openly calling for the closure of all checkpoints. The closure programme was set to culminate in the busy Nicosia checkpoints around the Christmas season. The programme was widely publicised in the media and was met with reactions on social media by rapprochement supporters who began taking measures to respond on a political, legal and activist level. The first attempt by the far right to close a checkpoint, namely the newly opened Derynia checkpoint, did not attract large crowds. Meanwhile, AKEL released a sharp statement, demanding that the police assume responsibility. The ruling DISY party and the police also released statements. Within the unfolding climate, it became clear that not even ‘symbolic closures’ would be tolerated, thus forcing the ‘citizens’ initiative’ to put its plans indefinitely on hold.

28 Anastasiades’ government without consulting the UN or the Turkish Cypriot side, ignoring the Bi-communal Technical Committee on Health and the European Union which
By closing four crossing points to the northern part of the country, Anastasiades’ government alluded that the threat to public health came from the Turkish Cypriot community and shifted the public attention away from public health to the politics of Cyprus division. The nationalist political authorities in the Turkish Cypriot community responded to the Greek Cypriot nationalist challenge by closing different additional crossings. When the first cases of Covid-19 were detected a few days later and the lock-down measures and entry restrictions imposed in the airports was only informed post-facto, and without devising any plan as to what measures to adopt as a preparation for dealing with the imminent Covid-19 threat, proceeded unilaterally to close four of the seven checkpoints under its control (the remaining two of the nine are under the control of the British Sovereign Bases on their southern part). This increased immensely the traffic on the main crossing in Ayios Dometios while it neutralised the distant one in Pyrgos-Limnitis since its use was largely complemented through the use of the Astromeritis checkpoint which closed. The closure of the Ledra street checkpoint, the busy pedestrian crossing point in the heart of the old city, however, was the biggest blow and of immense symbolic significance. The peace and reunification movement could not but react to this direct attack on its hard won right to cross the dividing line and as it was to be expected the Ledra street checkpoint became the main site where this was played out. Spontaneous reactions began on 28 February when the government announced the closure which coalesced into a demonstration the following day. On Saturday, 29 February at noon, several hundred Greek Cypriots pushed the barricade put by the police down and stormed into the buffer zone meeting dozens of Turkish Cypriots who also came there effectively forcing the re-opening of the checkpoint for a few hours. This unprecedented act of civil disobedience illustrated both the significance of the existence of open checkpoints for many Cypriots as well as their readiness to act in order to keep them so. It also showed however the unscrupulousness of Anastasiades’ government and his readiness to ally with ELAM which boasted that closing the checkpoints was its own suggestion. This drift of Anastasiades to the far right was not restricted to Cyprus problem management but extended more broadly to the issues of migration and the treatment of refugees and the handling of the Covid-19 crisis.

Following the civil disobedience action of 29 February, Anastasiades’ government orchestrated a comprehensive campaign using the nationalist media, the police and the far right to defame, vilify and frighten the peace movement in order to prevent a repeat of citizens forcing open the checkpoint again. The media focused on the image of a ten-second scuffle by protesters against a soldier who was illegally present in the demilitarised buffer zone and used to assist the police against the protesters to delegitimise the peace movement. The police bullied the peace protesters on television and harassed individuals threatening to charge them for ‘illegal assembly’ and ‘rioting’ and the far-right staged protests in the next days, demanding the closure of all the checkpoints. The peace movement was not cowed and several more hundreds protested on the following Saturday, 7 March, joined by some hundreds of Turkish Cypriots who entered the buffer zone and pushed from the north making the Republic of Cyprus’ police lose its temper and use spray against the Turkish Cypriot protesters.
began in both sides, the two remaining checkpoints were closed as well by the TRNC which formally considers them as its borders.

The concept of the unfulfilled potential with respect to the open checkpoints does not only refer to the first few days and weeks following the 2003 opening, when crowds took a leap of faith (albeit a silent one). There was indeed a social breakthrough, which did not however become a springboard for a substantial social reform. The unfulfilled potential concerns the entire period of open checkpoints, the political dimensions of which will be discussed in the following chapters, after reference is first made to the socio-economic level of things. The Green Line Regulation legally institutes a series of rights: not just the freedom of movement for people from one part of the country to the other, but also free economic activity. Consumer rights, such as the unobstructed purchase of products for personal use up to a value limit, and commercial rights adhering to EU safety and hygiene regulations and certifications by the commercial and industrial chambers of the two communities are the most established of these rights, the reason being that, in contrast to production, employment, investments and so on, no issues of ownership or state intervention and regulation have cropped up.

Yet, even on the level of consumer rights and commerce, no inter-communal ties that could have significantly helped kickstart a political process of reunification through economic partnerships and an improved climate were ever forged. On the contrary: throughout this post-2003 period the Greek Cypriot media orchestrated a number of major or minor incidents of hysteria aimed against those Greek Cypriots who had dealings with Turkish Cypriots, accusing them of unethical behaviour, lack of patriotism and even treason. The main argument against bicommunal transactions was that they amount to a ‘funding of the occupation forces’, that is that every euro spent in northern Cyprus further empowers the occupation regime and the Turkish army by boosting the economy of the occupied side. On a consumer level, despite the fact that this dominant ideological construct did dissuade many people considerably for several years, recently, due to the financial crisis, the drop in Greek Cypriots’

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30 For a comprehensive review of the Green Line Regulation and its operation in the last 15 years see Ersözer, F. (2019) The Green Line Regulation and its potential for Cooperation in Cyprus, Nicosia: PRIO
31 The percentage of Greek Cypriot youths who have crossed to the other side is significantly lower than the equivalent Turkish Cypriot percentage. Hatay M and Charalambous G. (2015) The Post-Annan Generation: Student Attitudes Towards the Cyprus Problem.
standard of living and the economic difficulties faced by an increasing number of people, the power of this argument has begun to fade. The monopoly conditions that predominate in the Republic of Cyprus and the inability and reluctance of the state to check profiteering and high prices that can be observed in a number of products and services, combined with the recent steep fall in value of the Turkish lira, all contributed to that.

The most striking example of guilt-tripping aimed at people having transactions and the promotion of a negative image that supposedly supports the argument about ‘the boosting of the occupied territories economy by Greek Cypriots’ involved the annual report of JCC, the Cyprus e-commerce payment portal. Whereas for every year up to 2017, the Turkish Cypriots, who are significantly outnumbered by the Greek Cypriots, would spend more money in southern Cyprus in comparison to the amount of money spent by the Greek Cypriots in northern Cyprus, most headlines would only mention the millions spent by the Greek Cypriots in the occupied territories.\(^3\)\(^2\) This example of crass negative propaganda would repeat itself every year in relentless monotony.

In the commercial world, transactions and partnerships were much fewer and met with stronger reactions. The few Greek Cypriot merchants who used the Green Line Regulation were under great pressure.\(^3\)\(^3\) There

\(^3\)\(^2\) Examples include: Stylianou M. (2012) ‘Greek Cypriots spend millions in the occupied territories’, \textit{Sigma Live}, 18 September [Μαρία Στυλιανού, «Ξοδεύουν εκατομμύρια στα κατεχόμενα οι Ε/κ»] \url{http://www.sigmalive.com/news/local/3453/ksodevoun-ekatommyria-sta-katexomea-oik-ek}, ANTI, ‘Greek Cypriots spent over 11.5 million euros in the occupied territories and Turkey in 2014’, [«Πέραν των €11,5 εκ. ξόδεψαν οι Κύπριοι σε κατεχόμενα και Τουρκία το 2014», 16/1/2015 \url{https://www.ant1.com.cy/news/oikonomia/article/196985/peran-ton-115-ekxodepsan-oikuprioi-se-katehomena-kai-tourkia-to-2014}], Eurokeros, ‘Six million euros worth of card transactions in the occupied territories and Turkey’, [«Συναλλαγές €6 εκ. με κάρτες σε κατεχόμενα και Τουρκία»], 4/8/2016 \url{http://www.eurokeros.com/%CF%83%CF%85%CE%BD%CE%B1%CE%BB-%CE%BB%CE%B1%CE%B3%CE%AD%CF%82-c6-%CE%B5%CE%BA-%CE%BC%CE%B5-%CE%BA%CE%AC%CF%81%CF%84%CE%B5%CF%82-%CF%83%CE%B5-%CE%BA%CE%B1%CF%84%CE%B5%CF%87%CF%8C%CE%BC%CE%B5%CE%BD/}

\(^3\)\(^3\) There were also obstacles for Greek Cypriots to do business in the north, for example double taxation, and difficulties for Turkish Cypriots to do business in the south as well as pressure from the TRNC to not use the Republic of Cyprus’ ports. Overall, despite its legal ingenuity and significance, the Green Line Regulation was unable to lead to substantial integration of the two communities because of its design shortcomings and the accumulated domestic obstacles erected which were legal, political, administrative as well as social and
were also cases of verbal abuse and intimidation, especially with regard to the marketing of farm products of Turkish Cypriot origin. In fact, the last few years have seen even more reactions, including protests at the checkpoints. In the Republic of Cyprus, a request for a ban on the import of products originally made in the occupied territories was more strongly expressed. In their most explicitly political form, these reactions were put forward in terms of ‘protection of competition’, as considerations for the ‘health and safety’ of the products for the benefit of consumers and also as a way of fighting unfair competition. As of 2018, in addition to agricultural organisations, the request for the ‘amendment of the Green Line Regulation’ has been adopted by SEK as far as the unions are concerned and has also been officially adopted by the Cyprus Employers and Industrialists Federation (OEB) and the Cyprus Chamber of Commerce and Industry (CCCI).\(^3^4\)

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\(^3^4\)Simerini (2018) ‘OEB proposals for improvement of the economy’, [«Προτάσεις της ΟΕΒ για βελτίωση της οικονομίας»] 25/3/2018, Simerini, http://www.sigmalive.com/simerini/business/497022/protaseis-tisoev-gia-veltiosi-tis-oikonomias, Kathimerini (2018) ‘SEK calls for re-examination of the Buffer Zone Regulation’, [«Η ΣΕΚ ζητά επανεξέταση του κανονισμού της Πράσινης Γραμμής»] 18/4/2018, Kathimerini http://www.kathimerini.com.cy/gr/kypros/h-sek-zita-epanexetasi-toy-kanonismoy-tis-prasinis-grammis

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\(Sime\)rini, F. (2019) The Green Line Regulation and its potential for Cooperation in Cyprus, Nicosia: PRIO