

# Towards a Radical Politics: Grassroots Urban Activism in the Walled City of Nicosia

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## Abstract

*This article presents the emergence and development of grassroots and self-organised activism in Nicosia. Following the thread of crucial actions, including the Occupy Buffer Zone (OBZ) movement, within the UN controlled area of the old town of Nicosia, we elaborate on a transforming political subjectivity, exploring its timeline, composition, demands, practices and potentials. Through everyday practice and direct socio-political and cultural action, activists contest the dominant narratives and the institutionalised 'bi-communal' co-operation towards a 'communal' identity and a new radical politics. They manage to produce common space of demand in the old town, while localising the global call for action inspired by the recent global uprisings. Finally, we examine the rise of burgeoning new dynamics in times of capitalist crisis and the new tasks ahead.*

**Keywords:** Buffer Zone, Occupy movement, grassroots activism, political subjectivity, walled city of Nicosia, community

## Introduction

The 'Cyprus Problem' marks a historical period of ethno-national, geo-strategical and socio-political conflicts, referring to the island and the Eastern Mediterranean as well as to the broader imperialist antagonisms. In conceptual terms it is the symbol of the 'unsolvable conflict', not least on the subject of official diplomatic peace-talks and institutionalised activism. It represents the 'perpetual expectation', while at the same time confirming the idea that nothing is more permanent than the temporary. Or, it is about a state of exception (Benjamin, 1969; Agamben, 2005; Constantinou, 2008; Trimikliniotis, 2010) having already become the normality for the last forty years.

The Green Line that still divides the island separates the northern Turkish Cypriot area from the southern Greek Cypriot side, reminiscent of the junction points of the bi-communal conflicts

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\* We would like to thank all the participants of the grassroots movement in Nicosia, across the Green Line, who shared with us their experiences, as well as, their thoughts and anxieties, during our participatory fieldwork between 2009 and 2013.

in the 1950s during the anti-colonial struggle, the first division of the capital city of Nicosia in 1963 and the *de-facto* division of the island in 1974. Nevertheless, although both Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots were killed and forced to kill, and came to be internally displaced refugees (Hadjiyanni, 2002), on the level of collective memory two different historiographies emerge. For Turkish Cypriots, 1963 is established as a year of pain, blood and betrayal that they will not forget (*unutmayacağız*), while 1974 is the Greek Cypriot reference point representing the island's division and people's painful loss and displacement that Greek Cypriots do not forget (*den ksechno, dev ξεχνώ*).

In the period 2003–2004, almost thirty years after the *de-facto* division, Cyprus turned over a significant historical page. In 2003, Ledra Palace barricade in Nicosia opened to allow everyday crossing. Then, one year later, a historic referendum took place to endorse the final version of the 'Annan Plan', suggesting a federation of two constituent states. The referendum resulted in a 'NO' vote expressed by 76% of the Greek Cypriots and a 'YES' vote by 65% of the Turkish Cypriots. On 1 May 2004, Cyprus joined the European Union (EU) as a whole, however the *acquis communautaire* remains suspended because of the division of the island, thus transforming the Green Line into a peculiar EU boundary.

Coming to the present, the economic and socio-political agenda is marked by the Cypriot crisis. On 17 March 2013, the Greek Cypriot President, Nicos Anastasiades, announced his plan to avert the island's bankruptcy: the 'least catastrophic option',<sup>1</sup> which basically referred to the haircut on people's deposits. For the first time in its modern history, Cyprus found itself to be the centre of international publicity,<sup>2</sup> not because of the 'Cyprus Problem', the division of the island and the continuous peace-talks, but because of its position within the domino of the capitalist crisis. In a climate of uncertainty and shock due to the closed banks and the long queues formed at ATMs, the southern part of Cyprus experienced some of the most massive rallies in its recent history, which were not linked directly to the national issue but to its economic policy. For almost one month thousands of people gathered every day outside of the House of Representatives or the Presidential Palace. Then, virtually twelve months later, the common proclamation of the Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot leaders opened a new round of negotiations together with a public debate regarding Cyprus' reunification.

That said, this short reference to the junction points of the Cypriot historical process of transformation serves only as a canvas, while the main goal of this article is quite different.

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1 An English transcription of the Presidential Proclamation can be found here: [<http://www.enetenglish.gr/?i=news.en.article&id=326>]; Speech of President Anastasiades, Video from National TV Channel RIK, uploaded by enikos.gr: [[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=owpi0RMg\\_Ok](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=owpi0RMg_Ok)].

2 Some of the articles we draw upon are BBC News Europe, 17 March 2013: 'Cyprus Bailout: Parliament Postpones Debate': [<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-21819990>], accessed on 8 February 2014; RTE News 17 March 2013, 'Cypriot President says Bankruptcy was Alternative to €10bn Bailout Terms': [<http://www.rte.ie/news/2013/0316/376965-cyprus-bailout/>], accessed on 8 February 2014.

Although there is thorough analysis referring to the geo-political strategies, the economic policies and the institutionalised actions, there is little written in the literature regarding the grassroots dynamics developed by both the socio-spatial division and the need to overcome it. This article hopes to compose a different narrative on the inter-communal relations and movements, thus placing the development of an alternative, grassroots activism at the centre of the debate. In other words, it pushes the ethnic conflict and the geo-political strategies into the background in order to shed light on the developing grassroots activism, which emanated mainly within the space of the UN Buffer Zone in Nicosia's old town.

The opening of the barricades by the Turkish Cypriot authorities, plus the failure of the official peace-talks, the rejection of the 'Annan Plan' and the disappointment towards the institutionalised bi-communal activism of the political parties, the trade unions and the NGOs together composed a new socio-political framework in 2003–2004. In this framework, a political subjectivity manifested itself, seeking to express an alternative way of thinking and acting as well as a desire for 'change'. It was the starting point of the grassroots activism as an ongoing process that has been forming a germinal political tradition. But what kind of 'change' are they fighting for? Elaborating on the recent uprising in Turkey, Alain Badiou suggests that it is right to rise up, but when doing so, 'the problem of the duration and the scope' opens up (Badiou, 2013). Additionally, another question emerges in relation to the actors' identity in the way they perceive or construct themselves and their cause. The political scene is a quite fluid and bitty one, interrelated with anarchist, radical left, anti-authoritarian and autonomous groups, mainly comprising sections of the island's educated youth from both sides of the divide. They insist in forming a 'communal' political identity in contrast to the mainstream ethno-national segregation or the liberal and economic character of the institutionalised 'bi-communal front' (Zanou, 2012). In the present climate the grassroots political action is strongly affected by the current capitalist crisis, while the political subjectivity is being transformed in dialectical relation with collective action, bringing together several potential actors (Badiou, 2013) within the generation of crisis.

There are fruitful studies on grassroots activism's important moments in Cyprus and especially on the 'Occupy Buffer Zone' (OBZ) movement in 2011–2012.<sup>3</sup> However, there is no systematic record or clear claim that there is a developing political scene attempting to express and represent a new radical politics. The starting point and the core of our article suggest that there is a political subjectivity, which is more than the sum of its significant 'milestones'. This subjectivity attempts to create its own social spaces, political tradition, identity, slogans, lifestyle, ideas and new radical politics. We argue that it made its appearance in the period 2003–2004 and especially in

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3 See the relevant chapter included in Mig@Net Report 10 at: [www.mignetproject.eu/] as well as the paper presented by E. Iliopoulou and P. Karathanasis (2012) at the 'Right to the City – Right to the State Conference' in Nicosia 2012 plus the article by M. Erdal Illigan (2013). Moreover, there are various articles and notes written by the bufferers themselves, published in their website and other blogs.

the divided old city of Nicosia, in a socio-political context marked by the opening of the Green Line barricades and the disappointment in the negotiations and mainstream politics. In the Cypriot context, it goes beyond 'bi-communalism' towards a 'communal' identity, while contesting both nationalisms. On the global level it perceives itself as part of the anti-globalisation, anti-neoliberal, anti-capitalist movement, inspired by global developments and the recent uprisings.

A crucial junction point for this transforming subjectivity is the capitalist crisis: The 'generation of crisis' led massive revolts and movements against austerity, repression and injustice worldwide creating historical moments of what Badiou calls 'the rebirth of history' (Badiou, 2012). From the Greek revolt in December 2008 to the Arab Spring, the Spanish Indignados, the global Occupy movement and the revolts in Turkey and Bosnia and Herzegovina, the popular uprisings show us that 'the collective power of bodies in public space is still the most effective instrument of opposition when all other means of access are blocked' (Harvey, 2012). In the Cypriot context, the first and most significant moment of action by the 'generation of crisis' was the OBZ movement that confirmed David Harvey's note in 'Rebel Cities' that 'the struggle is global as well as local in nature' (2012). The OBZ movement was the localised expression of the global call for action that stood up against the socio-spatial division on the local level, while criticising the systemic crisis on the global level. Nonetheless, crisis seems to be a shrill axis that penetrates all levels of social life beyond economy. The spread of distrust regarding the economic policies developed scepticism and a lack of confidence in mainstream political representation. In this framework, when the Cypriot crisis sharpened and led to the mobilisations in March 2013, a discussion emerged that pointed to the need for a grassroots, independent political body that would bring together the extra-parliamentary Left, the autonomous/anarchist groups and people involved in grassroots activism. On the one hand the leading thought behind this was the absence of a radical anti-capitalist discourse whereas on the other it was the quest for alternatives beyond the official politics.

By bringing together the above in the following sections, our aim is to unfold the subjectivity's characteristics, manifestations and potentials as regards the physical, urban and socio-political space in which it has been produced and reproduced during the past decade. In this sense, we refer to the walled city of Nicosia, where the grassroots activism developed, and we present the main initiatives taken by the activists up to the 'Occupy Buffer Zone' movement. Finally, by elaborating on the current crisis of our time we open the debate on the movement's potentials.

### **Grassroots Activism and the Walled City**

In order to have a better understanding of the development of grassroots activism in Nicosia, it is important to locate its actions and initiatives in space. The old town of Nicosia has always been a contested space between different communities and social groups, where contradictory interests, lifestyles and discourses confront one another. Surrounded by the cyclical Venetian ramparts, the walled city undoubtedly creates a 'whole' that is divided into two almost equal parts by the Green Line; the northern Turkish Cypriot part and the southern Greek Cypriot. The Venetian Walls

constitute a common historical reference, which both sides employ in their symbols and maps of the city. As Yiannis Papadakis points out, 'both sides' shared Eurocentric outlooks are revealed as long as both regard the Venetian monument as unproblematically "their own" or as part of their heritage linking them with the "West" (Papadakis, 2006). Furthermore, the Venetian fortifications constitute the city's first border, while the Green Line and the Buffer Zone between the two boundaries constitute a wall inside the wall. Yet, both have been spatial manifestations of power. As Michel Foucault points out, 'traditionally, power was what was seen, what was shown and what was manifested' (Foucault, 1975, p. 187). From the Berlin Wall to the current Israel/Palestine border and from Belfast to the large barrier constructed on the border between the USA and Mexico, the inclusion as well as the exclusion has to be visible. Thus, following the thought of Peter Marcuse (Ellin, 1997), walls produce and reflect fear as well as security. In the case of Nicosia's walled city both conceptual qualities co-exist. Whereas the wall around the city serves to protect it, the wall inside the city divides it and leads to increasing insecurity and an absence of trust. The cyclical shape of an embrace and the linear shape of a cut or a rupture coexist, re-ordering the old town of Nicosia from a closed entity in the middle of Cyprus, to a contested space on the edge of two separate communities, sovereignties and 'worlds'.



**Figure 1:**  
Map of the divided walled city of Nicosia, in the middle of Cyprus.

The old town constitutes a peculiar borderscape of both separation and contact. It is a *liminal* space, where, as Blake argues, 'social boundaries are blurred and normal rules of conduct and role expectations are held in abeyance or even in opposition' (1981, p. 95). The concept of *liminality* (Van Gennep, 1960; Turner, 1974) refers to a transitory, in-between state or space, which is characterised by ambiguity, hybridity and a potential for subversion and change. In post-colonial and cultural studies *liminal* has been successfully used to describe the different beings on the border, or on the threshold; in-between distinct entities, spheres, identities or discourses. In *liminal*

spaces, in the words of Homi Bhabha, there is 'a potentially disruptive inbetweenness' (1994), where the potential of the development of hybrid identities and subjectivities exists.

Thus, while the old city of Nicosia constitutes a space of discipline, where the side that one belongs to defines his or her identity (Foucault, 1975), at the same time, due to its reinforced 'inbetweenness' in the area following the opening of the barricades, it acquires the potential of the development of hybrid identities. These antithetical characteristics of the old town of Nicosia seem to create the physical and socio-political landscape for the development of local grassroots activism. From 2003, immediately after the barricades opened, a steady growth of a multiple, yet self-organised activism has been evolving, mainly on the southern side of the city, but with several attempts of co-operation between individuals and groups from across the divide. The growth of this activism was definitely affected by the several global developments, but it was also strongly linked to the lack of political representation, essentially by sections of the middle-class and the educated youth as well as by young people returning to Nicosia after studying or working abroad. The events and actions forming this activism range from protests, squatting in buildings and hang-outs in public space, to festivals, cultural events, political or artistic activities or even mobile parties organised by several groups of activists and residents in the old town.

Even though the area within the walls has appealed to alternative political traditions from as far back as the 1980s, it is only since 2003 that there has been a public appearance of such activities and events that, it could be argued, formed some kind of grassroots movement. Still, the arrival of these alternative socio-political activities is also related to an increased interest in this part of the city that developed during the same period. On the one hand, this interest relates to people with alternative artistic or other cultural backgrounds that were attracted to the area, hence forming a broader alternative cultural scene; a prospect which offered potential actors and participants to grassroots actions. On the other hand, the rise in interest also refers to land investors and developers, who bought land in the vicinity and became important actors in the gentrification of the old town and the attraction of different social groups to the area, especially after Cyprus joined the EU.

### **Organising From-Below**

In this section we focus on three main manifestations of grassroots activism that best describe its development in the area within the walls; the cultural centre Kardaş, the Phaneromeni Square and the Street Parade. The first initiative to be discussed appeared soon after the opening of the barricades. Activists from both sides of Nicosia – leftists and members of extra parliamentary political parties – rented a building on the southern side of the old town (near Ledra Palace Hotel crossing, which was the first check-point to open in 2003), and transformed it into an inter-communal cultural centre. Kardaş (i.e. Brother, in Turkish), was initially an attempt to communicate with the 'other' side, while supporting the reunification of Cyprus in the period before the 2004 double referenda regarding the 'Annan Plan'. For thirty-nine years the only way

for people from either side to meet was at the United Nations' hosted meetings in the headquarters of the Cyprus Peace Keeping Force, in Ledra Palace Hotel. Kardaş was one of the first common political attempts on the island that did not come under the auspices of the UN.

According to its manifesto, Kardaş' character is made clear:

'the first youth organisation, which is not "Greek Cypriot" or "Turkish Cypriot", but simply Cypriot was founded in Cyprus (...) one of its main aims will be the cultural activity for the creation of communication channels between all the communities of Cyprus, for the strengthening of unity, brotherhood and peaceful co-existence in a society based on the principles of democracy, acceptance and solidarity'.<sup>4</sup>

In its opening lines, it is highlighted that the initiative would share a conjoint 'communal' identity rather than identities based upon the ethno-national conflict.

During the approximately five years of its 'life', Kardaş manoeuvred through different phases. It enticed several people from both sides of the city, who derived mainly from leftist and anarchist political backgrounds, together with sections of the Greek Cypriot youth who were politicised within radical music cultures (such as punk and hip-hop). Furthermore, this initiative managed to create a self-organised shared space where several events, assemblies, talks and other activities (such as lessons of Greek and Turkish language) took place. But most importantly it managed to create a place of reference characterised by communal principles and self-organisation as well as participatory and direct-democratic ways of decision-making.

Moreover, Kardaş offered an opportunity for the activists to become familiar with the old town. Those who had initially met in Kardaş began to hang out within the walls of the city and use the public space. Gradually, Phaneromeni Square<sup>5</sup> became the new meeting place in the city for youngsters – forming groups of political and cultural expression. Kardaş closed in early 2008, by which time grassroots political activism had already moved into the walled city and merged with other youth urban cultures. Several activities in the area were inspired by global re-appropriation and sub-cultural practices, for instance, street parties, graffiti or other global urban movements such as the international bicycle mobilisations 'Critical Mass'.<sup>6</sup> Also, during the same period (2006–2008) a squatting movement developed in the area, particularly close to the Green Line. Squatting<sup>7</sup> in abandoned buildings (such as 'Mala Casa', i.e. 'Poor House' in Spanish)

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4 Taken from an announcement of Kardaş published in Athens Indymedia in October 2003: [[https://athens.indymedia.org/front.php3?lang=el&article\\_id=150189](https://athens.indymedia.org/front.php3?lang=el&article_id=150189)] (translated from Greek by the authors).

5 Phaneromeni Square is a small square located in front of the Phaneromeni church, the largest Christian Orthodox church within the walls. The Phaneromeni area was also a central area in the anti-colonial struggle of the period 1955–1959, when Greek Cypriots were demonstrating in the square against British rule.

6 'Critical Mass' bike rides are leaderless events that are organised without formal licence. Mobilisations with bicycles started in San Francisco in 1992 and later spread to cities around the world forming an international movement of urban space (re-)claiming. For more information see: [<http://critical-mass.info/>].

7 Squatting is the act of occupying an abandoned (or empty) piece of land and/or building that does not belong to

provided more space for various actions and alternative cultural practices like music events, concerts or parties.

By 2009 the presence of grassroots activism in the area was strengthened through everyday activity and the growing trend of public, political and cultural events organised in public space. These events refer, on one hand, to protests focused on the socio-spatial division of the city and the 'Cyprus Issue', building on the existing rapprochement activism<sup>8</sup> and organised on the whole by groups of the extra parliamentary Left. On the other hand they refer to actions against gentrification projects such as the Eleftherias (Liberty) Square reconstruction or the plans for a new Orthodox Cathedral in the old town.

During this period, Phaneromeni Square (or 'Manolis' Square, as named by the people, who frequent the area<sup>9</sup>) became a popular everyday – and night – hanging-out place for the youth. At the same time, it turned into a lively public square used for discussions and assemblies as well as for cultural events like street parties and alternative music festivals. In the words of a participant, Phaneromeni Square 'gradually became an open social centre that was created on its own, a place where teenagers and a bit older people come to spend their free time'.

The 'Phaneromeni crowd' was a mixture of middle-class youth, ranging from mainly teenagers and people in their early twenties to some people in their thirties and even forties, representing a palette of styles and urban cultures. In terms of their political background they were generally connected to radical left, autonomous and anti-authoritarian political ideologies, sharing also common ideas regarding ecology, atheism, anti-nationalism, anti-fascism, anti-sexism and anti-

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the squatters. Squatting in a building in an urban area can be an act of necessity covering the need for housing, or it can be a political act which is connected with political movements such as anarchism and autonomy creating an urban movement mainly in Europe and the USA. In some cases the terms 'occupy' and 'squat' can be used to mean the same thing, especially when they refer to buildings in residential areas. However, in this article we use the term 'occupy' to refer to the occupations of public spaces, which are connected with the public squares occupation movements started in 2011 from the occupation of Tahrir square in Cairo, and developed mainly in Europe and the USA, and the term 'squat' is used to refer to occupations of buildings within a city.

8 Rapprochement activism refers to the activist movement that developed in Cyprus during mainly the 1980s and 1990s, when the contact between the two sides was not possible because of the division. The rapprochement movement was supported by the UN, which organised meetings between groups from both sides of the island at its headquarters at Ledra Palace Hotel placed within the Green Line of Nicosia. Rapprochement activism was an institutionalised form of activism between the divided communities that slowly declined after the opening of the roadblocks in 2003.

9 'Manolis' is a Greek man's name which was given to the tree located in the centre of the square by youth hanging out there in the 1990s. The tree was given its name because of a circular bench that surrounded it before the renovation of the area around 2005. The name was taken from a childrens' Greek folk song and game that has the following lyrics: 'Round-round all and in the middle is Manolis ...'. Even though, after the renovation, the circular bench was replaced with a new linear one, the youths that started hanging out in the square in the mid-2000s kept the name 'Manolis' as an active assessment of their intimacy with the area; a vernacular name given to a square that was being claimed as a different public space in the area.

racism. However, their common ground was the everyday use of the square as well as the participation in horizontal socio-political events, organised from-below.

Conversely, two events were crucial junction points for the emerging grassroots political subjectivity in the area. The first was the Greek revolt in December 2008 that followed the killing of a fifteen-year-old boy, Alexis Grigoropoulos, by a police officer on duty in Exarcheia, an area in Athens well known for its radical left and anarchist political character. The murder of the young boy by the police led to massive protests and riots for many days. The profound acts of public protesting and the expression of social dissent gave birth to grassroots unions, groups and initiatives, while strengthening the anti-authoritarian political scene, the direct democratic practices as well as direct action and squatting. 'December',<sup>10</sup> as the events of 2008 in Greece were later named, also strongly affected the grassroots political activity in Nicosia. It was a time in which more people became involved in the movement, especially high school students, who saw in the face of Alexis their own generation. They joined self-organised political actions as well as the broader radical libertarian scene.

The second junction point refers to the police actions against two Greek Cypriot students who, whilst handcuffed on their knees, were beaten by plain-clothed officers. The incident had been anonymously filmed and aired on the newscast of national TV channels, yet the Greek Cypriot court found the police officers involved in the beating 'not guilty'. This decision prompted a big public assembly in Phaneromeni Square that gave birth to the grassroots citizens' movement 'Alert'. Through direct democratic public assemblies and protests on the streets and the courts, 'Alert' brought together different people in support of the two students and against police violence. According to Yiannis, a young activist, who participated in these actions:

'both "December" and citizen movement "Alert" did not only affect us, the people already active in the area and the ones participated in all the protests, but it affected a more wide audience. Especially "Alert" because it was something that the Cypriots feel more, because it happened in Cyprus and it created an atmosphere against the police that led to the mass protests against police violence.'

The rise of the political *bottom-up* activity in Phaneromeni Square came together with the emergence of alternative cultural practices, like graffiti and slogan writing, or street partying and drinking in public. But, these practices were not welcomed by some neighbours, and especially by the church, whose complaints attracted the attention of the Greek Cypriot Media. Discourses expressed against the forming Phaneromeni crowd, in an act of mimicry of the Athenian political

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10 'December' was a major political event in the country in 2008 that affected in multiple ways not only the anti-authoritarian and anarchist political movement in Greece, but also more generally the youth towards a more alternative, non-representative and grassroots political activity. Moreover, this event has been the focus of several academic accounts published in the years following. See: R. Astrinaki (2009), C. Douzinas (2010), S. Stavrides (2010), A. Vradis and D. Dalakoglou (2011) for more on Greek December riots.

**Figure 2:**

Stencil Graffiti originally from Istanbul in solidarity with the events of Greek ‘December’, that reads in Turkish: ‘Alexis, you are my brother’ (Alexis is the name of the boy shot dead by Police in Athens). The stencil appeared on the walls of Istanbul, Athens and Nicosia promoting solidarity against police violence between people of supposed hostile nations. However, this stencil localised in the political landscape of divided Nicosia – where the picture was taken – acquires additional importance against nationalistic discourses. For more on this, and other stencils in Nicosia, see also: Karathanasis (2010).



reality, labelled Phaneromeni Square as the ‘Exarcheia’ of Nicosia, arguing that besides the radical political ideologies, the people hanging out in the square were drug users, vandals and therefore dangerous.<sup>11</sup> The hostile public discourse sharpened the tension between the Phaneromeni crowd and the police authorities, and action was taken against the street parties by exerting police controls and music bans or even arrests.

In order to continue the free parties without triggering further anxiety in the neighbourhood or confronting the police, the activists participating in these events came up with the idea of refashioning the street parties into ‘Street Parades’. In this way the same neighbourhood would not be disturbed for too long. ‘Street Parades’ as these moving parties were named, mirrored an event that took place in Athens between 2006 and 2009. Thus, a platform on wheels was used to carry a generator, a sound system and a Disc Jockey, to lead a moving and dancing crowd around the old town and the outer city centre to a loud and colourful party. ‘Street Parade’ presents an important grassroots activity developed in the area because it was initially organised on a collective basis, which promoted equal participation of different people (including Turkish Cypriots). And secondly, by using free movement in the city, the parades re-activated several areas in a diverse and creative manner, offering an alternative mapping of the city, whilst at the same time attracting more people of various ages. Finally, its mobile character helped the ‘Street Parade’ to go beyond

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<sup>11</sup> Nikolas Pantopiou, *Sigma Live News*, 22 April 2010: [<http://www.sigmalive.com/news/local/259838>], accessed on 17 March 2014.

Phaneromeni area and its political character towards a cultural, communal, profile that was open to all. Following this trajectory, 'Street Parade' was the first initiative to actually move inside the Buffer Zone, between the two check-points at the Ledras/Lokmaci crossing, located near Phaneromeni area. The movement of the dancing crowd inside the Buffer Zone offered an intense experience to the participants of the 'Street Parade' and succeeded in actively claiming the space *in-between*; the dead zone. This claiming of the Buffer Zone presented the activists with the critical experience to step forward and proceed to the Occupation of the same spot during the global Occupy movement in 2011–2012 and create the local Occupy Buffer Zone movement.



**Figure 3:**

Photograph of the moving platform with the DJ on board and the dancing crowd in front, taken inside the Buffer Zone at Ledras/Lokmaci checkpoint, during the first Nicosia Street Parade in December 2009 (photograph by the authors).

The three initiatives discussed above; firstly, the rented social centre Kardaş; secondly, the systematic use of the public space in Phaneromeni Square, and thirdly, the 'Street Parades', offered important experiences for the activists involved in the development of grassroots activism in Nicosia and played a vital role in the materialisation of the Occupy Buffer Zone (OBZ) movement. Even if the above are not the only actions that could be considered a part of the grassroots activism developed within the walls, these initiatives did act as reference points for the

creation of 'communities of action' that brought together activists from the two sides of the city, but also activists from different generations and political backgrounds. Despite this, grassroots socio-political activism has remained primarily a characteristic of the southern part of the old town and while Turkish Cypriot activists have participated in several of these actions, only a very limited number of grassroots initiatives actually took place in the northern part.

One of the first initiatives that can be considered a part of this kind of socio-political activism in the northern area is the gathering of young Turkish Cypriots in Kuğulu Park in early 2011. Kuğulu Park was a localised event inspired by the incidents in Tahrir square in Cairo during an intense period of mass mobilisations of the Turkish Cypriot community against the local government and Turkey's austerity measures. As the call for the gatherings stated:

'It's time for solidarity and uprising against suppression. It is time to light the fire of revolution! It is time to say no to the dictators that reign over us! It is time to take over the STREETS, uphold our DIGNITY! Bring your guitar and your voice and your spirit for the revolution! Note: this is a politically independent event.'<sup>12</sup>

Even so, grassroots characteristics have been attributed to other events in the northern side of Nicosia such as the double annual protest for the 'demilitarisation' of Nicosia that has been taking place since early 2011 on both sides of the Green Line. This protest has been organised *from-below* by the groups forming the grassroots movement on the southern side and by the Turkish Cypriot political party Yeni Kıbrıs Partisi (YKP) [New Cyprus Party] on the northern side. This is probably the only event in which the self-organised Greek Cypriot groups co-operate with a registered political party due to its special character.<sup>13</sup>

Through their self-organised socio-political and cultural actions in the *liminal* area of the old town, the participants and organisers perform their right to live, imagine and even change the space they choose to socialise and act by doing so. They create, even temporarily, the space in which they can perform their alternative (or even hybrid) identities; and this is true for people coming from

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12 The call taken from the 'events' page on Facebook: [[https://www.facebook.com/events/19245663077\\_3937/](https://www.facebook.com/events/19245663077_3937/)].

13 Since its foundation in late 1980s YKP 'deemed the whole of Cyprus as a common homeland' and has been boycotting the local elections 'believing that election won't be a remedy as long as occupation [by the Turkish army] conditions continue'. In the strictly controlled political context of the unrecognised state in north Cyprus, YKP was not welcomed by the regime and it was marginalised because of these political ideals. However, despite the attacks by the regime, YKP following its ideals 'continued the communication with various political forces in the southern part of the island (...) issued common declarations with political formations in the South and performed common activities'. Besides the communication with political parties in the south, in recent years YKP has also been co-operating and co-organising events with political groups of the growing grassroots movement of Nicosia. In the absence of a grassroots movement in the north, YKP's actions acquire similar characteristics and its members are participating in such events, either in the north, or in the south. Some YKP members participated in the OBZ movement and they also participated in the gatherings of Turkish Cypriots in Kuğulu Park during early 2011.

both sides of the divide. Suna, a Turkish Cypriot girl described this very well:

‘We cannot use the old town in the north in the same way as in the south, here people look at you and you do not feel calm. In the other side, especially in places like Phaneromeni square is cool and nice, nobody looks at you and you can be ok and calm to enjoy a beer on the street.’

Besides, these collective actions include public urban space in the old town not merely as the place of their action but also as the locus of their action; claiming their right to live and use public space. However, activities and events in the public space, like those preceding the OBZ, do not only offer the opportunity for people to perform their identities but they also create communities of collective action in which people who participate do not necessarily share the same values or even identities, either ethnic or social. These temporal *communities* that (re-)produce themselves through collective activities and via participation in the use of public space are what Stavros Stavrides (2011), drawing on Raul Zibechi (2010), calls *communities on the move*. Quoting Marc Purcell, ‘one might still be part of a national community, but since one can equally inhabit the city regardless of nationality, urban inhabitation must come first in defining political community’ (Purcell, 2002). Such *communities* create their places in the space of the city and subsequently develop while redefining and re-appropriating public space. They locate and attempt to establish themselves in specific places in the public space within the walls of Nicosia through everyday practice and direct action (Graeber, 2009), and in this way etch themselves into the environment around the Buffer Zone. We could then argue that urban grassroots activism introduces a new-born *right to the city* in Nicosia while contesting formal forms and styles of urban life, as well as dominant ethno-spatial divisions through the social production of urban space and the restructuring of socio-spatial relations.

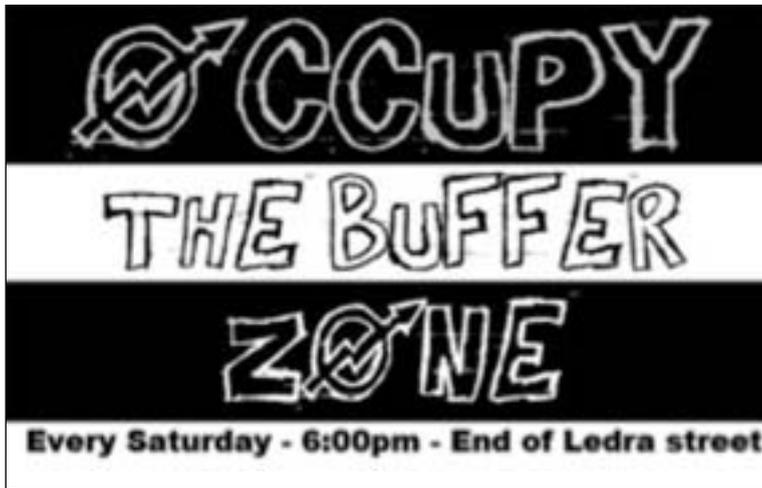
### Occupy (the) Buffer Zone

‘The OBZ movement abolished the essence of bi-communality and in fact reinstated a sense of communality’ (bufferer).<sup>14</sup>

‘Everything started on October 15th. It started with people meeting up in Eleftherias (Liberty) Square. Someone created a Facebook event and people gathered. We were meeting once a week. And then at some point on November 15th we started going to the Buffer Zone, between the two checkpoints and continue the discussion there. And then we said “hey let’s set up some ten[t]s.” It was something spontaneous’ (bufferer).

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14 Bufferers is the preferred term chosen by the people themselves who participated in the occupation of the Buffer Zone.



**Figure 4:**  
Digital banner used to call for participation in the first weekly gatherings organised inside the Buffer Zone at the Ledras/Lokmaci crossing.

The spontaneous act of simply putting up tents in the Buffer Zone soon became a permanent camp and gained momentum attracting several people, or in other words not a homogenous crowd. As Murat Erdal Ilican puts it: 'the OBZ crowd in the Buffer Zone gained a following from a variety of backgrounds including social classes, political orientations, education levels, ages, sexes, ethnicities and religions. What united them was a general discontent of the situation locally and globally, and their aspiration for change from the bottom up' (Ilican, 2013, p. 60).

The linear gap of the Buffer Zone was transformed into an inhabited public place, a 'square' where people met, sang, drank, ate, slept, discussed, played, argued and demonstrated. The activists' physical presence and resolve were crucial elements for a new spatial perception and production and, therefore, for the 'revival' of the so-called 'dead zone'.

In other words, the new concept that entered the debate affecting both the spatial as well as the socio-political level is the 'demand', the 'claim' of space transforming the Buffer Zone into a common space of demand while contesting the dominance of the official urban action. In that context, mobilisations managed to localise the global call for action spread by the global Occupy movement, translating the demands into the 'language' of the local issues.

As Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri argue in a small piece written during Occupy Wall Street, the 2011 public square occupation movements around the world, from Cairo's Tahrir square to Madrid and Athens, are very different and they are 'not simply iterations of what happened elsewhere. Rather each of these movements has managed to translate a few common elements into their own situation' (2011). The common elements between the numerous movements of public space occupations according to several authors include not only the struggle against economic inequality and capitalist accumulation, but also the issue of political representation. Dissatisfied with the ways in which representative democracy operates, they turned to participatory and self-

organised democratic ways of action and decision-making, best described by the term horizontalism<sup>15</sup> (Sitrin, 2012).

The OBZ movement was certainly one that contained something 'germinal'. According to the bufferers themselves,

'this movement is important because it's different from other movements, it happened in a no man's land. Nobody owns it. No country, no flag, no nation. It's a free zone, a gap.'

Taking part in the same discussion regarding the local demands and the movement's conceptual framework, another Turkish Cypriot activist added,

'demands change from person to person, I think. The main idea is about dealing with the problems caused by inequalities. Many issues come from that. It's not only capitalism. It's small things in life as well. We created an environment for people to think about alternatives. That was the common ground. I think. An alternative space for creative thinking.'

In the same context, it would be repeated several times over that the main goal was 'to create awareness', while a Greek Cypriot bufferer remarks that

'it was unbelievable! Within a few days a whole community was created on that 'square'. It was self-managed, horizontal, based on general assemblies.'

The process of occupying a former empty place, or else a *non-place* (Augé, 1995) and turning it into a public space for all, is interrelated with the socio-political process of contesting dominant policy, stressing 'the need to restructure the power relations that underlie the production of urban space, fundamentally shifting control away from capital and the state and toward urban inhabitants' (Purcell, 2002). Being *together* in a place of nobody was a chance to experience co-existence *here and now* in a way that co-existence is no longer a demand but a product of the bufferers' direct action (Graeber, 2009). Another Greek Cypriot activist pinpoints that

'we thought about camping for a night. But then the UN forces came the other day. They told us that we bother them and that we had to leave. But we didn't. The UN provoked us, so we stayed ...'

Inspired by the need to overcome the failure of formal narratives and policies regarding rapprochement and reunification, bufferers argued that grassroots activism can play a leading political role:

'if the OBZ is consistent, it will definitely affect the political scene. It does not mean that we are going to become a political party, but in some way we create a political tradition' (bufferer).

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15 'The term "horizontalism", from the Spanish horizontalidad, was first used in Argentina after the 2001 popular rebellion there (...) movement participants described horizontalidad as the most natural way to listen and to connect to one another. Horizontalism has since become a word and expression used throughout the world to describe social movements seeking self-management, autonomy and direct democracy' (Sitrin, 2012).



**Figure 5:**

Photograph of a banner from within the OBZ encampment. Statement reads: 'WE ARE HERE TO UNITE THE ISLAND REMOVING US MEANS YOU'RE SUPPORTING A DIVIDED CYPRUS – MAKE UP YOUR MIND – (ALL ARMIES **OUT** OF CYPRUS!).'

Photograph by the bufferers.

Choosing the Ledras/Lokmaci crossing was symbolic, as:

'the buffer zone is a symbolic place; it symbolises a lot of things; the UN regulation, the division'. At the same time it offers a kind of utopia: 'in the buffer zone it was the first time that we lived together willingly, creating something out of nothing' (bufferers).

The buffer zone, which is a symbol of the division and separation of Cyprus, became the vehicle through which OBZ realised itself as a movement and acted towards satisfying the need of the bufferers to overcome the divide and live together. In the same way that Wall Street 'ever a metonym of global finance capital', but today a symbol of economic injustice and wealth accumulation, became the prism through which the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) movement understood itself and became a 'master signifier which gave meaning to events' (Glück, 2012). In other words, both OWS and OBZ movements were influenced and acquired their relatively popular appeal by the fact that they occupied the strong symbolic spaces of Wall Street and the Buffer Zone.

Regardless, the 'right to the city' claim carries a particular danger from the moment of its birth: the fetishisation of space. Both in the OBZ and in other cases of the global occupy movement, the occupation and appropriation of public space turned from a tactical tool into the strategic goal of the movement. In that way the prioritised claim was the use of public space, undervaluing at the same time broader ideological visions, socio-political perspectives and long-term demands. As long as the free access to public space could be satisfied the ultimate goal seemed to be fulfilled, too. One can 'read' that comment in almost every popular slogan of the OBZ: 'We are living the solution', 'Welcome to the reunified Cyprus', 'No borders camp'. Was or will in the future such an aspect be a dangerous obstacle for the movement's development and success? Could the fetishisation of space become a boomerang in the hands of gentrification policies, embodied by the system as common

'human rights'? Finally, can we talk about the right to the city (in the Lefebvrian sense, 1968) separating it from the revolutionary process of social restructuring?



**Figure 6:**

Digital banner used by the OBZ as the main logo of the movement. The banner uses the outline of the walls of Nicosia as a circle to which an arrow is added to form the symbol of the international squatting movement. On the outside circle one reads the main slogan of the OBZ: 'One Cyprus – No Bullshit' and its web-address: [www.occupybufferzone.info](http://www.occupybufferzone.info)

### *Reception and Dynamics: Public Discourses*

The OBZ movement brought actions and discourses from the edge to the centre. Former marginalised thoughts, political statements, arguments and practices were brought to the centre of the debate forming supporters and opponents, or else forming a certain 'us' and 'them'; 'inside' and 'outside'. The buffers' action, or even their lifestyle, their taste, their clothes, the way they behave could no longer be ignored, since they occupied the heart of the city, contesting at the same time the heart of the city's division.

The OBZ movement was covered by the international Media almost from its very beginning. The turning point in the public discourse at least on behalf of the mass media was the public debate immediately prior and straight after the evacuation of the occupied building by the police forces. On 6 April 2012 the police of the Republic of Cyprus used its special anti-terrorist forces to invade the occupied place, and arrested 28 activists after a brutal attack. On behalf of the OBZ movement, the press release stated:

"The participation of the Special Anti-Terrorist Force shows the way in which the state handles the youth of this place, G/Cs and T/Cs, who claim a future which will be a creation of the Cypriot people themselves and not a creation of the existing domestic and world politico-economical and social status quo. We apologize for being unable to transfer in words the repugnant scenes of state violence we lived, and we wish to assure you that we will not stop existing actively and creatively. "You cannot evict an idea."

In order to invade the place and evacuate it from the activists, the police claimed that there was extended drug use in the area. After such an announcement, the link was beginning to be clear:

bufferers constituted a threat against social order since they were drug users, abnormal, unhealthy and therefore marginal. The TV Channel ANTI mentions

‘many attempted to prevent police investigations while forty people gathered in the area just after the event in order to ask for explanations. A 52-year-old British, who lives in Pafos was intoxicated, according to the police ...’

In two short sentences, the reporter manages to create the activists’ profile composed by aggressive behaviour against the law, weird mixture of ages and finally the most crucial moral issue: drugs and alcohol.

There was a consensus amongst almost all of the local informants on three accusations: they are ‘dirty’; they ‘take drugs’; they have ‘abnormal social and sexual behaviour’. Typical is the owner of a shop just a few metres from the border:

‘they do not even obey hygiene rules. I see them every day. Go there and see how they live in their filthy ten[t]s. I saw them taking drugs so many times. In front of my eyes they dropped a bag full of marihuana.’

During another discussion, a female shop-owner just round the corner, would repeat again and again

‘they have done me much harm. The night before the police attacked they had done so many damages out of our shops. They throw their garbage here all the time. They steal our banners in order to use them as blankets. We had to work in the morning and we faced all that dirt.’

Some metres away, on the other side, a Turkish Cypriot shop-owner in Büyük Han would also agree, ‘unfortunately, there are some youngsters who take drugs. I hoped that it wouldn’t be that way.’

The ‘bufferers’ on the other hand have a totally different view, strongly countering the above accusations, as ‘these are only ways to make a scandal: drug use, older men with under-age people, vandalism’, contending that ‘dirt is something you find everywhere. In our case it was just used for marginalising’. Another activist, who would definitely disagree with all those arguments mentions, ‘the place was being cleaned every day. All those who support such accusations, do not agree with the movement. Perhaps they do not even want the island to be reunified. Maybe they are right-wingers or fascists who express themselves like that in order to spoil the movement. Even my mom was visiting the place and she said that it was clean’. Emphasising how deeply unfair the accusations were, one highlighted that ‘we basically occupied a building, a destroyed building and we restored it. We tried to make it a place where we can enjoy, do things, activities and projects. Abnormal? Who? For whom? For the system everything we are doing is maybe abnormal.’

The OBZ movement is no longer only a political movement that re-claims the Buffer Zone but it also constitutes a battlefield of conflicting lifestyles, value systems and cultural identities. The right to the city became the spark for the debate on production of urban space and in parallel the

demand each side desired to monopolise. While people rallied around the ideas represented by the OBZ, dialectical opposites were being also constructed, accusing the buffers for being 'matter out of place' (Douglas, 2002 [1966]). Is this perhaps what makes the OBZ a grassroots urban movement that stands up for the 'right to the city', being a claim that 'cannot be divorced from that of what kind of social ties, relationship to nature, lifestyles, technologies and aesthetic values we desire' (Harvey, 2008)?

### **Grassroots Actions in Times of Crisis**

The Cyprus crisis, which burst in March 2013, is part of the broader systemic capitalist crisis, while being a crucial junction point for the Eurozone's pathway.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, it marks the current framework within which the inter-capitalist competition unfolds while the socio-political contradictions are being sharpened and rearranged.

On 17 March 2013, the new-elected President of the Republic of Cyprus, Nicos Anastasiades, gave a televised Sunday-night speech to the Greek Cypriot people, announcing a haircut tax of 6.75% on deposits under €100,000 and 9.9% on deposits over €100,000. According to the dominant discourse and the Troika experts (EU, ECB, IMF), the Cypriot economy was no longer the 'economic miracle'<sup>17</sup> but a monstrous economy of an 'over-extended banking sector'. At the same time, on the level of dominant rhetoric, the Cyprus crisis was presented as the result of personal responsibility of those, who used to 'live beyond their means', enjoying the fruits of the developing growth by building houses, receiving bank loans, loading their credit cards, cruising with expensive cars and feasting and loathing in consumption and easy money.

Two weeks after the Presidential proclamation regarding the haircut were enough to show a glimpse of the very near future: many businesses closing, personnel reductions, wage cuts, families living in fear of losing their houses and people queuing in front of ATMs in order to withdraw their savings. Thus, the peoples' response to this "shock therapy" for the ailing banking system' (Demetriou, 2013) was prompt. In a climate of uncertainty and shock, Nicosia experienced some of the most massive rallies in its recent history not referring directly to the national issue but to the economic policy. Thousands of people were gathering every day outside of the House of Representatives or the Presidential Palace. At that point, the combination of particular bourgeois interests and the popular protests pushed the parliament to say 'No' to the pack of measures (36 votes against and 19 abstentions) but class interests diverge, making this a 'No' soon to be followed by a majority 'Yes' by the political leadership.

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16 See also the article of M. Tsichli 'Cypriot Crisis and the Exit from the Eurozone' which offers a good understanding of the Cypriot case within the broader Eurozone crisis: [<http://www.antapocrisis.gr/index.php/articles/item/824-tsixli>].

17 The phenomenal growth of the economy of the Republic of Cyprus during the 1980s and 1990s has often been characterised as the Cypriot 'Economic Miracle'.

Regarding the blocks in the protests, it is safe to argue that the most massive ones refer to the opposition Progressive Party of Working People (AKEL), the United Democratic Youth Organisation (EDON) and to the Pancyprian Federation of Labour (trade union PEO). At the same time, from the very start of the mobilisations, a discussion emerged referring to the formation of a grassroots, independent political front that would bring together the extra-parliamentary Left, the autonomous/anarchist groups and people involved in the grassroots activism. The main motivation for such an initiative was the lack of a radical, anti-capitalist discourse that would go beyond the official Left, represented by opposition AKEL. ERAS (a coalition of various left tendencies), NeDA (Trotskyists, YRE), ANT.AR.T.E.S. (anti-capitalist Left), Coiling Irregulars (anarchist/ libertarian) and Skapoula (student group) were the main factors that composed an independent block in the protests, together with people drawn from the broader 'pool' of grassroots activism and the 'Phaneromeni crowd'.

Moreover, this block moved towards the creation of an 'Anti-capitalist Network'<sup>18</sup> that aimed to adopt the role of a radical, anti-capitalist front within the mobilisations and beyond. In the first call of the Network it is stated that

'We invite all comrades, groups and tendencies referring to the radical movement in Cyprus to form an insubordinate, anti-capitalist social network, horizontally structured, beyond politics of "management", "interclass national struggle" and the bureaucratic trade unions. To fight for social uprising till the end!'

General assemblies, events, discussions and protests followed in order to find a common ground among the participants.

But in spite of everything, this political initiative has not managed to gain a broader social support as yet. Likewise, it has not managed to involve relevant initiatives in northern Cyprus into a common struggle that would combine the current mobilisations with the grassroots rapprochement activism in the direction of a common class struggle. On the other hand, the need has been undoubtedly highlighted for a new type of radical politics that will contribute to the social struggles ahead: A politics that 'will merge the force of the people with the sharing of political ideas' (Badiou, 2013) and radicalise the labour, social, anti-imperialist, antifascist movement. It might be a new challenging era for the radical grassroots activism in Nicosia and Cyprus towards a promising expression of the generation of crisis, helping to understand the emerging subjectivity, its characteristics and its place within the political arena.

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18 For more information on the initiative for Cyprus Anticapitalist Network see: [<http://antikapitalistiko.diktiowordpress.com>].



**Figure 7:**

Photograph of a banner raised in front of the Ministry of Economics of the Republic of Cyprus, by members of the 'anti-capitalist network' that paraphrases the lyrics of a popular Cypriot folk song and reads:

'The money, money where are they? The Capitalists have put them in the pocket.'

### **Epilogue: What is Next?**

In an attempt to present the development of grassroots activism in the border area within the walls of Nicosia during the past decade, we have followed events and actions indicative of an alternative politicisation of an emerging political subjectivity. We have focused on crucial moments and initiatives in order to unfold its past, present and future as well as its composition and ideas. To sum up our basic arguments, we have elaborated on a transforming political subjectivity that aims to construct a 'communal' identity, contesting the mainstream politics of the negotiations and the institutionalised 'bi-communalism' towards a new radical politics. Additionally, we concentrated on the period of its emergence, its crucial manifestations, including the OBZ movement up to the recent Cypriot crisis. What is more, we have argued that it subverts the rupture of communality in the old town even forty years after the division, localising a common space of demand within the walls.

In interesting, yet turbulent, times the question of 'what is next' is a common agony. Will radical political forces and a stronger grassroots activism find the way to inspire the broader social movement towards a new radical politics against austerity, unemployment, privatisation, gentrification, nationalism, fascism and repression? Will they contribute to a common social struggle forming a radical content beyond the liberal reunification plans? These are crucial questions in times of crisis. Yet, the development of different forms of engagement with the 'other' remains equally crucial for Cyprus.

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