UNIVERSITY OF GOTHENBURG

REACHING ACROSS A CLOSED DIVIDE

Peacebuilding from below: a phenomenological study on the CSOs of Cyprus and the impact of regional tensions and COVID-19

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Abstract

Recent years saw several challenges to the conflict resolution of the protracted social conflict of Cyprus. Despite its frozen status, new challenges brought new opportunities for reconciliation. This study aims to contribute to the field of bottom-up peacebuilding. Therefore, this study has used a phenomenological research design to examine and explore how peacebuilding Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in Cyprus have experienced the COVID-19 pandemic and the escalations of tensions in the region. Through experiences and descriptions of past events that have helped shape the CSOs goals, and detailed descriptions of current experiences surrounding COVID-19 and the escalations of tensions in the region, this study was able to determine the impact that the recent challenges have had on the selected peacebuilding CSOs and what their hopes and perspectives are towards the future. In short, the lack of physical contact due to the closing of the checkpoints have severely harmed the CSOs peacebuilding activities. Pessimism that has been built upon from the past was further cemented through the political leadership's actions across the divide and resulted in a bleak outlook on the future from the CSOs.

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Introduction

Presentation of the problem

This study focuses on the contribution of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in peacebuilding and conflict resolution through peacebuilding from below. Specifically, in the case of a stalemate in political elite negotiations where the top-down approach has not achieved the desired result. In 1974, a ceasefire was declared for the ethnically divided island of Cyprus. Since then, the conflict has remained without resolution and with a UN buffer zone, dividing the island with checkpoints for citizens to pass from one side to the other. The Cyprus conflict (also referred to as the Cyprus problem) in its current state is a protracted social conflict (Azar & Farah, 1981, p.321). The conflict has been frozen for many years and previous attempts at establishing a resolution have not fruitful (Broome, 1998; Michael, 2007; Sözen, 2018). In short, the North side of the divide consists of mainly the Turkish-Cypriot community, the South mainly consists of the Greek-Cypriot community; both sides are in conflict with each other. Because of previous colonization, the United Kingdom (UK) is a guarantor power, alongside Greece and Turkey. The conflict situation has seen very little change in the last decades (Osiewicz, 2020). However, this study will explore whether the recent events; the escalations of tensions in the region between Greece and Turkey, and the COVID-19 pandemic have brought change in the dynamics for the Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) focused on peacebuilding in Cyprus. Recent escalations of tensions, caused by hydrocarbon drilling and exploration in the region between Turkey and Greece have created instability in the region (Ceylan & Baykara, 2020). These issues between Turkey and Greece are known to have consequences for Cyprus (Mirbagheri, 1998). Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic reached Cyprus and had far-reaching consequences. In 2020, checkpoints were closed as a precaution for the spread of COVID-19, although opinions are divided regarding whether this is the true reasoning (Ioannou, 2020a).

Both of the aforementioned problems have changed the state of CSOs and their ability to execute their peacebuilding activities. This study will explore the effects that these events have had on the organizations. It was decided to choose CSOs and look at peacebuilding from below because of the importance that communal intent holds for protracted social conflicts and the Cyprus conflict (Ramsbotham, 2016). This, considering for instance, that the UN Mediated Annan Plan came to a vote by the Cypriot public. Furthermore, this study would like to give a voice to these organizations and the adversity that they are currently facing, and have faced in the past, which could provide insight into the consequences that certain actions, such as the closing of checkpoints, might have on the ones attempting to build peace from below – which also affects the future of the Cyprus conflict.

Aim, objective and research questions

This study aims to examine and explore the CSOs of Cyprus involved in peacebuilding and the impact COVID-19, escalations of tensions in the regions and several other events have had

through analysis of the CSOs experiences of these events. Firstly, it will aim to find out what past events (pre-2019) have shaped the organizations and how those experiences have impacted them. Secondly, it will explore the operational difficulties for the CSOs during escalations of tensions in the region and the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, the study will explore whether these events have impacted the outlook of the organizations on the future of the conflict and their own organizations.

In order to reach a result, one main research question and three sub-questions were decided on to help guide the research. The overarching research question for this study is:

How have the recent challenges, such as COVID-19 and escalations of tensions between Greece and Turkey, impacted bi-communal CSOs in Cyprus?

With this research question the experiences of the CSOs are central to the study. Additionally, the opportunity exists to look to the past and the future to examine possible consequences of the previously mentioned events. To guide the research, three sub-questions were chosen.

1. *What past events have shaped the CSOs experiences and opinions?*

This question was chosen to find out which events from the past have had an influence on their current stance towards the conflict and peacebuilding. Because of the length of time that the Cyprus conflict has been protracted, several events have led CSOs to behave a certain way, hold certain activities or have certain opinions on the conflict and its resolution. As Sagan (1980) stated "*You have to know the past to understand the present*".

2. *What have the CSOs experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic and the regional escalations of tensions?*

This section specifically focuses on the experiences of the CSOs during COVID-19 and the escalations of tensions in the region. The closing of the checkpoints and the political pressure and instability that these events have brought to the island are examined through exploration of experiences of CSOs with working online, not being able to organize face-to-face activities and having additional political pressure on their objectives and goals as a peacebuilding organization.

3. *How do the CSOs observe the future of the Cyprus conflict?*

This section focuses solely on the prospects of the future for the CSOs. This was chosen because of the kind of work the organizations do. In the end, their activities aim to inspire change and conflict resolution. Because this generally does not happen overnight, their activities focus on the future. The perspectives of the organizations towards the future would therefore be a good reflection of the state of the civil society peacebuilders on the island. In addition to inquiries into the prospects of the future of the Cyprus conflict, the CSOs also reflect on the prospects

for their own futures as organizations. This again, to reflect the possible hindrance the COVID-19 pandemic and escalations of tensions in the region have had on the organizations.

Outline of the thesis

This study is divided into five parts, excluding the introduction. The first section will present a literature overview of the academic research already done in this field. Additionally, it will introduce the contribution of this study specifically, to the larger field of peacebuilding and European affairs. Secondly, the study will discuss the theoretical framework that has been chosen for this study. Moreover, it will clarify certain concepts that are used throughout the study. Thirdly, the methods used within this study are elaborated upon. Fourthly, the collected data is presented. This part includes the presentation of the empirical data as well as the consequent analysis of this data. In the final section of this study, the research questions will be answered – which will conclude this study. Furthermore, theoretical implications and suggestions for future studies are addressed.

Literature Review

This literature review provides an overview of previous research with regard to peacebuilding globally as well as in Cyprus specifically. A special focus will be put on peacebuilding from below. Additionally, a section will focus on peacebuilding from below in crisis situations and the contribution of this study is explained.

International peacebuilding

Although peacebuilding as a concept was established by Galtung (1975), the concept truly gained currency in the 1990s (Call & Cook, 2003). In its origins, peacebuilding has existed to create a successful reconstruction of the by conflict affected region or country (Doyle & Sambanis, 2000). At a minimum, it aims to establish security (Autesserre, 2017). Furthermore, peacebuilding actors should aim to not only establish negative peace, but positive peace (Autesserre, 2017, p.115). As defined by Galtung (1969), as negative peace being the absence of violence, and positive peace being the conditions that sustain the peace over a longer period of time. Some time ago, the assumption existed that through top-down approaches to peacebuilding, peace would undoubtedly trickle down to local spheres (Richmond, 2005, p. 149-180). However, success at the top-level did not constitute peace at the local level (Lund, 2003). The consensus amongst scholars is that a combination of top-down and bottom-up approaches to conflict resolution and peacebuilding yield the best results (McGuinness, 2012; Lederach, 1997; Autesserre, 2017, p.118). The result of top-down and bottom-up peacebuilding working together is referred to as hybrid peace (Mac Ginty, 2010). Consequently, in academic literature a shift is found in the perspectives of peacebuilding – from solely international to also including the local (Paffenholz, 2014). Additionally, the participation of non-state actors, such as Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and grassroots movements have unwaveringly increased over the past decades (Vogel, 2016). Such influence can be led back to scholars publishing different theories within the peacebuilding field. One of those with a profound influence is Lederach, with his conflict transformation-oriented peacebuilding theory (Paffenholz, 2014; Lederach, 1997). His theory defines peacebuilding as *"a long-term multi-track transformative contribution to social change, helping to create a just and sustainable peace"* (Paffenholz, 2014, p. 13). Reconciliation within society is at the heart of this theory (Lederach & Appleby, 2010). Moreover, its three tracks of peacebuilding are widely used (Paffenholz, 2014, p. 12). In short, the three tracks of peacebuilding are top-level leadership, middle-level leadership and grassroots (Lederarch, 1997). Although widely used, there is also critique on this model, mainly because of the limited role of outside actors in this theory (Paffenholz, 2014).

Peacebuilding from below

The following section will outline peacebuilding from below, also known as 'bottom-up peacebuilding' or 'community peacebuilding' – which is a contemporary peacebuilding practice (Campbell, 2011; Donais & Knorr, 2013). The origins of peacebuilding from below

are inspired by the long-term academic critique on international peacebuilding, or top-down peacebuilding, and the crisis of the liberal peace alongside challenges to the influence of the West (Vogel, 2016; Lefranc, 2011; Campbell, 2011; Mac Ginty & Richmond, 2013; Moe & Stepputat, 2018; Leonardsson & Rudd, 2015). The *"cultural insensitivity, disregard for traditions, norms, customs, and blindness to the local context"* were seen as responsible for the failure of international peacebuilding attempts (Vogel, 2016, p. 472). Peacebuilding from below is seen as a response to these limitations. The theory gained its importance in the mid-1990s and over time its value has been taken more into account in the broader peacebuilding field (Lefranc, 2011; Kanol & Kanol, 2013). This shift in focus is also called the 'local turn' and is seen as an opportunity to change the conceptualization in the making of peace (Mac Ginty & Richmond, 2013). The approach of peacebuilding from below starts with the assumption that the people most affected and currently living through the violence of the conflict are in the best position to create the most relevant solution to it (Campbell, 2011; McDonald, 1997). The goal of this approach is to transform the prejudices that exist amongst the population and highlight the relationships across divides. The aim of which is a peace that is more sustainable than the international peacebuilding efforts which solely focus on the elites (Lefranc, 2011). However, the inclusion of the peacebuilding from below approach does not mean that it has been used as the sole approach in peacebuilding operations. It has been used more as a co-option, in co-existence with the top-down approach (Campbell, 2011). Resulting in the concept of hybrid peace (Mac Ginty, 2010). Furthermore, both strategies have been known to operate detached from one another, resulting in limited vertical integration of the peacebuilding strategy (Donais & Knorr, 2013).

Peacebuilding from below also has its critics which mainly address the role of international actors and donors in the 'local' approach to peacebuilding, stating that through for instance financial aid, local actors are more inclined to align their activities with the ideas of the international actors – rather than execute their own ideas (Vogel, 2016). This would take away from the 'local' approach in such a way that it would not be possible to still refer to it as a 'local' approach. It is for this reason that this study has chosen to use peacebuilding CSOs who do not receive funding from international organizations who possibly wish to steer their activities in one way or another.

Peacebuilding in Cyprus

The Cyprus conflict is an excellent example of the necessity of following peacemaking, directly by peacebuilding (Fisher, 1993). Although, one cannot attribute the current state of the conflict solely to the late start with peacebuilding. Reconciliation is an important part of peacebuilding for Cyprus specifically (Lederach, 1997; Michael, 2007), and has had little to no focus within the Cyprus problem (Ladisch, 2007). Despite the role of civil society and their efforts within peacebuilding from below being seen as the key to conflict resolution (Kanol, 2010; Gillespie et al., 2013). An example of the necessity of reconciliation and a top-down combined with a bottom-up approach, is the failure of the UN Mediated Annan Plan in 2004. Although, Kanol (2010) noted that the success of civil society during the Annan Plan was visible, as the Turkish-

Cypriot community voted to accept the settlement plan. However, it did not reach success in the South. In the Annan Plan a top-down agreement was reached, but the referendum on the agreement, in which the communities across the divide could vote, was overwhelmingly rejected by the Greek-Cypriot community (Ladisch, 2007). Highlighting the problems with the limited nature of top-down peacebuilding in Cyprus (Jarraud et al., 2013; Lordos, 2009). The elites stated that this avenue of exclusion of peacebuilding from below creates *'greater flexibility and openness to compromise'* (Kaymak et al., 2008, p.3). This, despite decades of closed-door negotiation attempts with no solution (Jarraud et al., 2013). The denial of local agency in the peacebuilding of Cyprus, as well as the lack of acknowledgement from elite leaders in both communities regarding peacebuilding efforts from below are problematic and not helpful on the path to resolution (Mac Ginty & Richmond, 2013; Reed, 2013; Jarraud et al., 2013). Research shows that societal ownership of the peace process is the sole possible basis for a settlement and is necessary to counter the blame games and other spoilers to the process (Jarraud et al., 2013, p. 56).

Critique on the peacebuilding operations from below in Cyprus mainly center on the same issues as the general critique on bottom-up peacebuilding. Meaning that the involvement of international actors in the peacebuilding activities in Cyprus have been problematic (Kanol & Kanol, 2013). Vogel (2016) found that the CSOs with international donors struggled with solely voicing their own perspectives. Additionally, the legitimacy of the CSOs must be recognized by both the political leadership and the Cypriot public (Jarraud et al., 2013). Before 2010, several studies established that the state of the CSOs in the North and South of the island was 'weak' (Çuhadar & Andreas, 2010, p. 188). After 2010, there are no studies on the strength of CSOs in Cyprus.

Peacebuilding during a crisis

Peacebuilding during a crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic is a new topic. Although Autesserre (2017) stated that states in conflict are less able to respond to crises such as health crises, this statement is not underlined by research. Perhaps because it seems like a logical answer. At the time of writing, two articles have been published regarding peacebuilding during COVID-19. One focused on the effects of COVID-19 on cooperation and development projects (CDP) in Colombia and found that the pandemic is highlighting the differences and worsening the roots of the conflict (Eufemia et al., 2020, p. 387). Additional expected consequences are the cutting of budgets for peacebuilding operations as a direct consequence of the economic depression that follows (Eufemia et al., 2020, p. 387). Moreover, the study found that the limited social contact impacts the peacebuilding efforts negatively (Eufemia et al., 2020, p. 395). The second study found that the COVID-19 crisis played into the hands of the conflict and highlighted the divide (Bell et al., 2020, p. 1). Furthermore, it found that the situation is especially dire for peace processes as the online negotiations lack face-to-face contact (Bell et al., 2020, p. 2). Further research on this topic will likely be published in the next few years, when the short-term consequences of the pandemic will be more visible for the peacebuilding processes.

Contribution of this study

As stated above, the 'peacebuilding during a crisis' is relatively new. This study aims to help fill this research gap through focusing on a specific group within the bottom-up peacebuilding approach and their experiences during this crisis. Additionally, the study looks to the future through the lens of the pandemic and its effects on the CSOs that are working on the peacebuilding process, therewith providing a clear overview of the current situation for peacebuilding CSOs on the island of Cyprus. The results of this study will portray the limitations on the peacebuilding process and the impact that the closing of the checkpoints and the escalations of tensions in the region have had on the CSOs and their activities.

Theoretical Framework

This study will use peacebuilding from below as its main theory from which the relevance and the perspective of the study is built. Additionally, clarifications of the different concepts used in this study will be elaborated on.

In the previous section, the critique on liberal peace was already alluded to. Liberal peace is widely considered to be the dominant form of peace, in terms of peacemaking and peacebuilding, that is supported and promoted by international organizations, institutions and states from outside of the conflict actors (Mac Ginty, 2010). Additionally, this idea of international intervention is considered an idea from the global north and is built upon liberal values, with in some cases rather illiberal means of intervention and promotion of these values (ibid). Moreover, liberal peace uses a top-down approach, through which it fails to reach the population affected by the conflict (Donais & Knorr, 2013). Out of these critiques, the concept of local ownership arose and was seen as a condition for international peacebuilding to succeed (Richmond, 2012). Local ownership is meant to give legitimacy to international interventions as it protects the self-determination of the population which in turn aids to the sustainability of the intervention (Von Billerbeck, 2015). Local ownership and its use have many critics, stating arguments such as how easily overruled the imposition clause could be, and how it appears to be shaped by international peacebuilders regardless of local agency (Donais, 2009; Von Billerbeck, 2015). Because of this academic critique, this study has solely focused on local peacebuilding CSOs that were not funded by international donors.
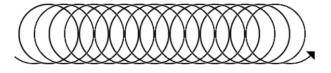
Peacebuilding from below theory

The most influential or famous theory of conflict transformation by John Paul Lederach is closely tied to the theoretical framework of peacebuilding from below (Campbell, 2011). His theory establishes three levels of local engagement in conflict resolution. Track I refers to the top local political leadership. Track II refers to middle-range local leadership and Track III to the grassroots movements (Paffenholz, 2014). As stated above, liberal peace mostly engages with Track I (Donais & Knorr, 2013). The role of CSOs in this theory is to contribute to conflict resolution through aiding in creation of alternatives when the top-down approach comes to a stalemate or preparing a society for peace (Paffenholz, 2014). Lederach (2015) stated that strategies of conflict transformation must include the community or would otherwise not be effective at all – as human relationships are at the heart of conflict transformation. Should the structural differences not be addressed, it would not be transformative. This community-based approach would then take into account the perspectives of the people directly affected by the conflict and the violence and use this as a point of departure for conflict resolution and peacebuilding (Campbell, 2011, p. 43). Lederach (2015) identified four modes of impact for transformation within a conflict. These being:

1. Personal
2. Relational

3. Structural
4. Cultural

These can be viewed from different standpoints such as 'how does the conflict change?' and 'what kind of changes are we looking for?' (Lederach, 2015). All are important in the transformation of a conflict. The relational dimension, for instance, would include the creation of understanding across a divide, while the structural dimension would look at minimizing violence and addressing the root causes of the conflict (p. 4-5). This is from the perspective of desired changes. However, from the other perspective the dimensions include the same issues but with a different approach. The relational dimension would then look at the issues of power and how close or far apart the two sides of the conflict wish to be. This approach is looking at the underlying changes that the conflict has made on the community and their relationships (p. 5).

Additionally, Lederach works with the understanding the peacebuilding and conflict transformation is not a linear process. There is no continuous line going upwards through social change, it is rather a circular process (p. 8). One should see it as a circle that keeps moving forward. The circle includes four parts, one in which things move forward, the second where a wall is hit and the circle stops rolling, the third where things move backwards, and the fourth in which things collapse (Lederach, 2015, p. 8). With every incident this circle rolls a bit further down the line, as seen below.

(Lederach, 2015, p. 9).

Central to this idea is the combination of linear and circular progress with a platform that exists to 'keep the ball rolling'. This platform is the center of the process and exists to aid short-term responses and long-term strategies (p. 9). In other words, the platform is an opportunity for both conflict parties to come together and discuss the present issue and the future.

Concluding, peacebuilding following Lederach is a structured process. The strategy, which includes the multi-track networking and cooperation, must work with the appropriate time frame (Miall, 2004). As stated above, the long-term and the short-term must both be addressed at the right time. It is important to highlight the significance of the strategy, as it addresses the whole of society, from elite leaders to grassroots organizations, where other forms of peacebuilding have only looked at the elite level. Given the protracted status of the Cyprus conflict, the hybridity of this approach, combining all levels of Lederach's pyramid (1997, p. 39) are stated to be the potential solution for Cyprus (Jarraud et al., 2013, p. 56).

Clarification of concepts

This section will define certain concepts that are used in this study. Those include the clarification regarding the naming of the two sides of Cyprus and the definition of a CSO.

North and South

After careful consideration, the decision was made to use 'North' and 'South' when indicating to one side of the divide in Cyprus. Several other studies have used the same words to indicate the regions within the island (Çuhadar & Andreas, 2010; Işık, 2013; Oktay, 2005; Kliot & Mansfeld, 1994). Although reasoning is not mentioned in these publications as to why they have chosen to use these terms. For this study, the usage of 'North' and 'South' has been chosen to avoid the study being placed in a debate on legitimacy of a state, ethnicity of the population or nationality. These classifications can be divisive, and this study does not aim to contribute to the 'other' rhetoric. Internationally, only one side of the divide is recognized as a sovereign state. Because the aforementioned debating points are not at the forefront of this study, the neutral 'North' and 'South' have been chosen.

Civil Society Organization (CSO)

Considering the variety of differences within the concept of a CSO a clarification for this study's interpretation of CSO was deemed necessary. This study has used the definition provided by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) as the basis for the categorization of organizations for this study because this definition provides a clear, all-round basis for the usage of the concept. The following definition is given by the UNDP:

> *"CSOs are non-state actors whose aims are neither to generate profits nor to seek governing power. CSOs unite people to advance shared goals and interests." (UNDP, 2006, p. 3).*

This study has selected CSOs on the basis of this definition. An additional criterion for participation was funding because of previous studies having shown that local peacebuilding CSOs might change their approach when receiving funds from international donors.

The theories applied in this study regarding the functional perspective of the CSOs use Utstein (2004), which states peacebuilding CSOs to be the central actor in the peacebuilding process. Utstein (2004) highlights the necessity of the role of CSOs in combination with the political framework. As stated by Obi (2018), CSOs cannot replace the framework of politics or political processes, yet its contribution should not be understated.

Methodology

Below, the different means used for the methodological part of the study are discussed. A qualitative approach with the use of semi-structured interviews is used for this study in order to gain in-depth data and insight into the experiences of the CSOs in the past, the present, and their observations for the future. A phenomenological approach was chosen for the examination of the data gathered from the informants through interviews regarding the effects of the tensions in the region and COVID-19 on CSOs who, among which, aim to foster a closer connection between the North and South of the island. Additionally, considerations and limitations of this study are addressed.

Phenomenological approach

The topic and research question are best answered using a qualitative study, with a phenomenological approach. This approach focuses on one phenomenon, in this case, the effects of the tensions in the region and the COVID-19 pandemic on the CSOs that work on the Northern and Southern side of the island. The phenomenological approach was chosen as its purpose is to describe the essence of the experiences before, and during the COVID-19 pandemic and regional escalations (Moustakas, 1994). This description will be the basis of the analysis of the phenomenon. Effectively, this translates to a description of experiences of the CSOs during the tensions and COVID-19 pandemic, as well as their prospects for the future. This description is made in the presentation of results section and analyzed in the discussion. The description of experiences method follows Kvale (1996), which states that the lived experiences are at the center of a phenomenological research. As this study solely focuses on the CSOs voices, thoughts and experiences, a narrow approach, such as a phenomenological approach is most suitable. The phenomenological approach uses interviews as a way to gather the necessary data (Groenewald, 2004). Therefore, this study will use semi-structured interviews as the basis of the necessary data. Additionally, Cohen & Omery (1994) defined three schools of phenomenological research: namely, interpretive, descriptive, and the Dutch School of research. The Dutch School approach combines the interpretive and descriptive approaches (Cohen & Omery, 1994). As this study combines interpretive and descriptive themes during the data collection, the Dutch School of phenomenological research was used.

Sampling and data collection

Below, the choice of site, sampling of informants and data collection is further elaborated on.

Choice of site
The choice of site was heavily influenced by the worldwide on-going health crisis. This meant that the ideal choice of site, Cyprus, was not feasible. Consequently, the choice of site was deemed to be online. Because the facial expressions and body language were deemed important to the study, the decision was made to hold the interviews through online services such as Zoom. This decision did ensure that the interviews took place on neutral grounds. Moreover, as the

informants could decide where they would situate themselves during the interview – a comfortable environment for the interview could be created. This did mean that there was a risk with regards to the reading of body language as it was limited to hand gestures and facial expressions only, as cameras were on during the interviews.

Sampling of informants

Prior to the interview requests, a criterion sampling was used on the CSOs of Cyprus to deem whether their purpose fit with the scope of the study (Patton, 2001). The predetermined criteria for this study mostly focused on the activities of the CSOs. The decision for CSOs was made through theoretical sampling. This refers to the usage of literature and theories in order to choose suitable objects for study (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Through the usage of theory which focuses on peace from below (or bottom-up peacebuilding, which is also known as participatory peacebuilding) in combination with local ownership, the decision was made to focus solely on local CSOs (Donais, 2012). CSOs that were suitable for this study should, at least in part, aim to foster a closer connection between the North and the South. As this did not have to be the sole focus of the CSO, different kinds of CSOs were included in this study, such as NGOs that focus on children, environmental issues and the arts. This criterion was chosen because of the peace from below focus of this study, of which the chosen CSOs are part. It would be of no use to include CSOs who do not focus on a form of peacebuilding, as they do not take part in the peace from below theory. Moreover, a criterion for the participation of CSOs in this study included the date of foundation of the CSO. As the themes in the interview guide touch upon different time periods, the establishment of the CSOs in relation to these time periods was deemed important. CSOs that have taken part in this study have a wide variety of years of existence, all enough to be asked questions regarding the different time periods.

As the interviewer does not speak Greek or Turkish, the initial selection was made based on the information available online in English. A solution to this problem, was the use of the chain or snowball effect (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Meaning, that during the interviews with the selected informants, a question was asked regarding similar CSOs to the CSO the informant was affiliated with. This ensured that local CSOs who did not include an English translation to their website, or did not have a website, yet were suited to this study, were able to be included. Moreover, regarding the language of the interviews, using English can be seen as a limitation to a certain degree. However, considering that several of the CSOs also communicate to their following in English, a sufficient level of English language skills for the interviews was to be expected and experienced during the interviews.

This study ensured that there is no North or South bias in the results through the sampling of the CSOs. This, by including CSOs from both the North and South or CSOs that have stated themselves to be bi-communal. In the selection of the participating CSOs, it was of importance to include both sides of the island. Although a part of their operations might be aimed towards the Northern or Southern population, the CSOs must have organized activities that bring together both sides, to be used as informants for this study.

The informants, on an individual level, were chosen by the CSOs and included individuals in different positions within the CSOs, such as chairpersons, directors and program officers. This choice was not made by this study. The CSOs chose an individual to represent their organization in this study with knowledge provided by the researcher of what the interview would be focusing on. Furthermore, in cases of a bi-communal CSO, both co-presidents were interviewed simultaneously. This choice was made due to the nature of the CSO, not because of saturation of the study. Should the researcher have chosen one of the presidents to interview, it would have possibly been perceived as a bias towards one side of the conflict – this was to be avoided.

Additional importance was put on funding that CSOs might receive. As this study wants to avoid the possibility of international influence on local peacebuilding through donor relationships, CSOs were asked about their funding during interviews. This was done to ensure that there was no outside meddling in the activities of the CSOs.

Data collection

Data collection took place during the month of February of 2021. The interviews followed a phenomenological approach as the study is interested in the lived experiences of the CSOs during the period of tensions and the COVID-19 pandemic (van Manen, 1990). Meaning, that the interviews included open questions, to best gather the data necessary to answer the research question (Roulston & Choi, 2018). Furthermore, the interviews were to be in-depth and semi-structured. This to ensure that the researcher addresses all necessary themes during the interviews and have a similar data collection of all conducted interviews. Moreover, the semi-structured interviews provided the possibility for follow-up questions, especially in situations where the researcher did not expect a certain answer and requested more information or background. Considering that this study does not include a comparison between the Greek-Cypriot and Turkish-Cypriot sides of the conflict, an ethnographic approach was not deemed necessary. However, as stated above, the ethnic background of the CSOs was taken into account in the sampling of the informants.

The strategy for the interviews was the same for all interviews. This, because of the data that was to be gathered from the interviews. The informants all came from the same background, working or volunteering for a CSO, thus providing the answers to the same questions. The interview guide (Appendix 1) focused on three themes, excluding the questions regarding the background of the NGOs. This section included questions surrounding the activities of the CSO, their target audience and financial background. The first theme of the interview focused on the situation in and for the CSO in the period before the COVID-19 pandemic and escalations of tensions in the region. Therefore, the first theme ends in 2018. This theme aims to create a picture of the past and the events that have led the CSOs to COVID-19. Through questions regarding pressing matters before 2018, kinds of activities and experiences at the time – the first theme will describe the general trend in experiences before 2018. This data is relevant to compare to the second theme that focuses on the period during the COVID-19 pandemic and the escalations of tensions. Through comparison and analysis, perhaps a trend could be found in the sentiments of the CSOs. Questions therefore focus on the working environment, possible frustrations, organization of activities and opinion on the status quo on the island during this

time. The second theme focuses on the period of tensions and escalations as well as the COVID-19 pandemic. Questions are similar to those in the first theme, as they are used to determine whether there is a difference to be found in, for instance, the prospects for the future or participation in activities. Additionally, questions were asked with regards to the politics during the time and the effect that politics and the COVID-19 pandemic have had on the organization. The third, and final, theme focuses on the perspectives of the future for the CSOs. This was already touched upon in the previous themes, to establish whether the period of tensions, COVID-19 and other political scandals have had any influence on the prospects for the future, both on a political level and on an organizational level. Questions within this theme focus on the future of the conflict on Cyprus, the CSOs' involvement within the ideal future and the (then) upcoming 5+1 meeting.

Data analysis

For the data analysis of the interviews, an inductive and partly deductive qualitative content analysis was executed. This meant that the researcher created the coding scheme inductively in part, based on selected aspects of meaning to the study (Schreier, 2014). Key features of this approach are that it is flexible, systematic and that it reduces the amount of data. This approach also requires the coding frame to be adjusted whenever this is necessary, meaning that the steps of the creation of the coding frame are repeated. Because of the additional deductive nature, the focus of the coding being on the three main themes of the interview guide, all results outside of these themes of the past, present and future were not included in the data analysis. These three themes were established with the theoretical framework in mind. Moreover, as a test of the quality of the coding categories in the coding frame, double coding will be used as a test (Schreier, 2014, p. 171). Should the second coding frame yield the same, or similar results, then the coding scheme has passed the quality test. The coding frame yielded the following main themes in relation to the three themes of the interview guide:

1. History of exclusion of local CSOs
2. The hindrance of COVID-19 on peacebuilding from below
3. Low levels of effect of regional tensions
4. Pessimism towards top-down peacebuilding and conflict resolution approach

The above themes were chosen to guide the empirical analysis in order to answer the three sub-questions, which in turn help to answer the research question. The coding framework was created both deductively and inductively, and the coding was done manually. The deductive part of the coding was based on previous research that guided the questions of the interviews. Although time consuming, the immersion into the data through coding by hand, made it easier to find patterns and to ensure that nothing was left out of the study. This form of coding essentially combines data-driven coding with theory-driven coding (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). The coding process began by color coding based on the three themes of the interview guide. This was done through reading the transcripts of the interviews as well as watching and listening to the interviews again to analyze how certain things were stated. This process created a chronological structure and ensured that none of the data would be used outside of its context.

After creating this structure, the data was clear and ready to be coded into the additional codes established per theme. During this coding process several predetermined codes were broken up in different sections as the inductive coding of the data showed importance for a specific part of this code or yielded new results outside of the predicted results.

Through the connecting of the codes, similarities and differences were able to be established between the informants. These indicated areas of consensus and differences in experiences and opinions. During this stage, themes within the data were beginning to show, with majorities of informants stating the same experience or opinion. In the final stage of the coding process, a clear overview of the data was created. This coding process was then repeated to find out whether the initial coding yielded the same results, which was the case with minor differences.

Considerations

For the execution of this study, several considerations had to be made. Firstly, ethical considerations. Secondly, the trustworthiness of the study had to be examined. Below, several concepts will be elaborated upon, such as reliability, validity, credibility and generalizability.

Ethical considerations

As ethical considerations relate to avoiding harm and the responsibility for this lies with the researcher (Neuman, 2011). Being mindful about the ethics of a research is especially important in qualitative research, as this often focuses on experiences and feelings regarding the participants' lives (Khan, 2014). The researcher has committed to abstaining from unnecessary personal questions. For these reasons, this study has used verbal consent before commencement of the interviews. The researcher verbally informed them of their rights within this study and gave a brief overview of the study. The informants were made aware that the option for anonymity within the study existed and how the researcher would handle this. Furthermore, the informants were aware of the possibility of withdrawal of consent to the study that they could give at any time, as well as withdraw any statements made during the interview. Additionally, the researcher informed the informants of the wish of the researcher to record the online interview. For this, the informants had the opportunity to give consent, which all informants gave, and none stated to have second thoughts about. On this subject, the researcher also informed them on the storage of the data and that the research was the only one with access to the data. Moreover, before the start of the interview, the informant was told that they had the option to abstain from answering any question they did not feel comfortable answering without needing to provide a statement as to why they did not want to answer the question. The researcher would drop the topic without difficulty. Finally, the researcher mentioned that the participation in the study is voluntary. All interviews began with this statement and request for verbal consent. All informants answered all questions and had no objections to the use of their interviews after the interviews. The above statements regarding ethics were used to establish trust between the informant and the interviewer. Additionally, the researcher informed the informants of the researcher's background. The first several questions focused on the background of the informants, as a form of warm-up for the later questions which required more

thought and reliving of experiences. This flow of easy to answer question to more difficult questions was chosen to build confidence and trust between the interviewer and the informant (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012). Moreover, the interviewer researched matters that were to be discussed to create insight before the interview took place.

Reliability

Reliability and validity within phenomenological research are difficult concepts, as words can be interpreted in different ways (Beck et al., 1994). According to Giorgi (1988), reliability can be found in the consistency of the results of the study. In qualitative research, this is more difficult than in quantitative research (Newman, 1999). However, when the appropriate precautions have been taken, reliability in a qualitative study can be achieved. These precautions include imaginative variation and reduction methods in the data analysis (Beck et al., 1994, p. 258). Both of these precautions are taken in this study to safeguard the reliability of this study. They are done through the second coding frame, in which the imaginative variation is used.

Validity

According to Giorgi (1988), validity and reliability have some connection. This connection can be found in the acts of consciousness that are made by the informants and the researcher. There are three different acts of consciousness, as defined by Husserl (2002). All of these types are connected to the consciousness and intentionality which lies with phenomenological research. The three acts of consciousness are signifying, fulfilling and identifying acts (Beck et al., 1994, p. 258). The connection to validity is made through the use of identifying acts, as should they be consistently performed, they attest to the validity as well as reliability of the study. This study does this through the use of a second coding frame to ensure quality of the coding frame. This way, data is interpreted twice.

Credibility

Patton (1999) mentioned three distinct elements to determine whether a study is credible. These are the following:

> Rigorous techniques and methods for gathering high-quality data that are carefully analyzed, with attention to issues of validity, reliability, and triangulation; the credibility of the researcher which is dependent on training, experience, track record, status, and presentation of self; philosophical belief in the value of qualitative inquiry, that is, a fundamental appreciation of naturalistic inquiry, qualitative methods, inductive analysis, purposeful sampling, and holistic thinking. (Patton, 1999, p. 1190).

As previously stated, reliability and validity are important parts of this study and are ensured through different taken precautions. The credibility of the researcher can be attested to through the educational background of the researcher. Furthermore, as this study would not be possible without knowing and understanding the value of qualitative inquiry, this element is also met in

this study. Finally, as stated in the data analysis section, an inductive and partly deductive analysis is used through the creation of inductive and deductive coding frames.

Generalizability

To determine the generalizability of a study, one must look at which research methods are used (Jasper, 1994). For the case of a phenomenological study, the generalizability differs greatly from other forms of research methods, such as quantitative studies. Phenomenology is used as a descriptive tool, or in the case of the Dutch School of phenomenological research: descriptive and interpretive. Phenomenological research aims to identify, rather than to explain or predict (Jasper, 1994, p. 313). Considering that generalizability commonly applies to mostly explanative or predictive studies which generate theories which can be proven, discussing generalizability in a phenomenological study can be seen as inappropriate when taking into account the differences in intentions of these studies. In conclusion, this study cannot generalize results for all peacebuilding focused CSOs in Cyprus, however it can provide indications towards certain trends which can pinpoint directions for future research.

Limitations

Several limitations can be noted through the use of this methodology, and the study in general. Firstly, the interviewer did not have the option to hold the interviews on the island of Cyprus. This left out the possibility of face-to-face interviews, in which one is able to interpret the body language of the informant better than through online interviews – even if the informant is visible through a camera. Secondly, regarding the reliability and interpretation of data, the possibility for error still exists for the researcher (Beck et al., 1994). This can cause the reliability and validity of the study to change. This limitation exists for all phenomenological studies. Thirdly, because the analysis of data was done by one researcher, there was no possibility of using different perspectives (from researchers with different areas of expertise) on the data. Moreover, the opinions of the informants of this study are not representative of the whole population or all of the CSOs of Cyprus. However, it can provide a good indication of the trends within the peacebuilding field of Cyprus.

Presentation of data

This section will outline the gathered data from the interviews held with a variety of Civil Society Organizations in Cyprus. The following part is divided into three sub-chapters. They each outline different results recovered in the data collection. The first part will focus solely on the experiences of the organizations before COVID-19 and the escalations of tensions in the region in 2019. This will include events that have shaped opinions of the CSOs. The second part will focus on the experiences of the organizations during the COVID-19 period and the escalations of tensions in the region. This part will highlight the changes that have occurred to activities and potential changes on the outlook of the future. The third, and final, part will look towards the future and the expectations and hopes of the organizations.

Background Civil Society Organizations

This section will outline information regarding the CSOs that have taken part in this study. Issue-based peacebuilding is popular in Cyprus. This means that some of the CSOs in this study have a focus on a specific topic. Specifically, there are two CSOs that have a main focus on environmental issues, two CSOs with a stronger focus on activism for reunification, one CSO with a focus on art, one CSO with a focus on youth and sports, one CSO with a focus on women in conflict / peacebuilding, and one CSO with a support focus for civil society across the divide. This variety gives different results in different sections of the data presentation. For instance, some CSOs were used to having an online presence and did not experience a lot of change when COVID-19 began hindering their face-to-face operations. Others solely held activities with human contact and had to change their approach to their peacebuilding activities. Although this variety does not represent the entire CSO population of Cyprus, the present variety paints a good picture of the general situation on the island.

Not all of these CSOs receive funding. Some are completely based on volunteers and do not receive any kind of financial support. Others compete in funding opportunities from different international institutions such as the EU, or international charities. This kind of funding is often on project basis for which the CSO creates the framework. Meaning that the project is designed by the CSO and its design competes for funding, therewith establishing no outside influence on the project. Some CSOs also have the option to donate and receive donations from participants during activities and friends. Regarding location, the CSOs are situated all across the island, with a majority being situated in Nicosia. Additionally, because it is not possible to register a bi-communal organization in the North, most of the CSOs are registered in the South. Offices for the organizations were found in the buffer zone, or on either side of the divide.

Additionally, a variety can be found in the years of existence amongst the CSOs. Some have been established over forty years ago, others have come to existence in the last five years. The age of the organizations provided different views on how to deal with adversity as an organization, as some have been through a previous closing of the checkpoints and might have had an easier time adjusting to the new situation with the COVID-19 pandemic.

Past experiences in shaping events pre-2019

The recent past relating to Cyprus and the East Mediterranean region have been tumultuous. In order to establish whether the sentiments established in the later sections of the presentation of results had previously existed, this theme was chosen and included a look to the recent past. Several themes came up during the data collection. Firstly, the North of the island, in which mostly Turkish-Cypriots reside. Secondly, peacebuilding efforts of the past and the effect that these have had on the state of affairs for peacebuilding on the island. Finally, politics on the island – in particular the frustration that is felt towards politics.

The exclusion of the North

Several organizations stated that there is a stark difference between the Turkish-Cypriot community in the North and the Greek-Cypriot community in the South. This difference is stated by several organizations as an effective isolation of the North towards the South and indirectly towards the international community. When asked about the situation for the CSOs in the North, an informant responded that validation plays a part in why the Turkish-Cypriot community and CSOs are isolated: *"Because they want to avoid the risk of indirectly validating the Republic of Turkish Northern Cyprus" (interview 1).* This is due to both the legal status of the land and as mentioned in interview 1, the Southern government forbidding embassies to engage with the Turkish-Cypriot population in the North. This meant that for instance, certain exchange programs found their end – leaving the community even more isolated as an informant mentions:

> *"In the Northern part of Cyprus, we have a French-Cypriot Association promoting French culture in the Northern part of Cyprus. In the past they were receiving some support from the embassy in Nicosia, now it has been many many years and they do not receive any support, I know also that the French embassy or consulate or even the French school are forbidden to have any contact with them (…) and I think I can give you this as an example, but I know that, and it has to be proven, I am not saying that I am right, but it is something that is very openly stated that the embassies are receiving from the ministry of the RoC very clear instructions that you cannot collaborate with the Turkish-Cypriot community" (interview 1).*

In Europe, the North is left out of the Erasmus+ program, leaving the students of the North with unequal opportunities in comparison to their counterparts in the South, who do enjoy the benefits of the Erasmus+ program. Three organizations established in their interviews that this does not aid in creating the idea of equality across the island. Furthermore, as was experienced during several interviews, there are internet connection problems in the North. One informant stated that: "*The rain comes, or something happens, the internet connection goes always. (interview 4).* Especially, later during the closing of the crossings this would become a more pressing problem.

Peacebuilding efforts

Regarding peacebuilding efforts in the past several points came up during the interviews. For instance, three organizations that explicitly stated that they felt that the people they were attempting to reach out to were fed up with "peace". They felt that they could not reach people if their message solely focused on bringing peace to the island. Instead, those three organizations, as well as two others, stated that their focus was on issue-based peacebuilding as highlighted by the following statement from an informant:

> *"The way we work, many people will tell you the same thing, we try not to focus only on peace, we do not only encourage peace activities, for us it is very important because everybody is fed up with this peace thing. Everybody has been trying to make peace, but it does not come. Now CSOs prefer that civil society have the opportunity to come together on common issues, on topics that are key concern for both sides, like environment, violence against women, gender equality etc. So, this is very interesting actually, because when you have a concrete issue, the interest is higher, and you have an interdependency, for example the environment or refugees, you cannot just divide the topics, like the island is divided, these are concerns that impact everybody, every corner of the island." (interview 1).*

Reasons for being issue-based were not solely based on the sentiment that people were less interesting in peace as one informant stated: "*I think that what we are trying to do is inextricably link progress with the environment and progress in climate change with the concept of peace (...) to get on board with the environment and to get on board with climate change, you need to get on board with peace*" *(interview 2).* These issues range from, as mentioned previously by an informant, environmental issues to domestic violence. This approach was aimed to connect the people of Cyprus through issues that are not affected by borders. However hard they were trying to create an environment in which people were open to peace, the lingering thought in the background was disappointment because of previous failed attempts at creating peace through top-level (Track I) peace talks. One informant stated their disappointment:

> *"Within the progressive Cypriots that want to reunificate the country and work on peace, we feel a very very large disappointment because the last meetings we had, (...) only brought in the country disappointment and let us say now that the people are not so willing to participate in the events or some people say 'ah no chance to solve the problem' and this does not help our work so well" (interview 5).*

Along with this informant, two other organizations stated that this disappointment was hindering them in moving forward, as well as hindering their hope that their work would come to fruition. This was further established when five organizations stated that they had little trust in their politicians and leaders. The main reason for this was that the politicians or leaders were not found to be trustworthy, as they did not stick to their promises. A youth CSO informant stated the following: "*Politics do not do anything. So, if we wait for politicians to do something*

then we are (...) not going to go in the right direction. We never have been, and we never will be if they continue at this pace" (interview 7).

Additionally, both sides of the divide experienced being called traitors or not being welcome in certain events due to their bi-communal, peacebuilding activities. Four organizations explicitly stated that they had been called traitors by either politicians, the media or the general population of either side. An informant stated their experiences as follows: *"We were called traitors by Greek-Cypriots because we are working with 'the enemy'"* (interview 8). Another example from the other side of the border was mentioned by another informant: *"And we were traitors. (...) we were traitors because we were meeting with the others. Because of the nationalism of the leaders and they told to the people that the other people are the others and the enemies, unfortunately, on both sides."* (interview 4). This added to the difficulty that the CSOs were already facing on the island. As stated in interview 8, CSOs that undertake bi-communal activities and are located in the South, do not receive any kind of support from government. Despite CSOs continuously being used as peacebuilding from below initiatives when it is necessary during negotiation talks – the political support that is necessary is missing. An informant mentioned:

> *"Several times NGOs who are used as an alibi, like yes we have the NGOs, so things are moving. This was the alibi of the UN, Greek-Cypriot and Turkish-Cypriot governments all these years. So, NGOs can really make the change, NGOs can be game changers. But they are not, they don't have this tool, political support and resources."* (interview 8).

Political situation

Regarding politics, several different statements were made by the organizations on a wide range of issues. Firstly, the frustration at the involvement of the Turkish government in the North was mentioned by three organizations. An informant mentioned, when asked about the future with regards to the election in the North, that it also brings with uncertainty and a degree of fear: *"That gave us, in a short amount of time, in a brief amount of time, everyone was scared what is going to happen. This new leader is coming in. What has been Turkey's strategy. What is Turkey planning for the future?"* (interview 1). Further division can also be found in the population of the North, as stated by this informant: *"But there is somewhat of a division between say Turkish-Cypriot and people who came from mainland Turkey after the conflict"* (interview 3). Moreover, four organizations mentioned the economic and political situation of the last five to ten years to be a source of frustration, as was highlighted by an informant from a youth environmental organization: *"Especially youth feel a lot of frustration in Cyprus. Not just with the political situation but just with the general situation, with the economy, with the environment, the political structures."* (interview 2). Furthermore, three organizations mentioned that the status-quo regarding the state of the conflict (deadlock) was not sustainable, whether this be for economic reasons or for environmental reasons. An environmental NGO stated the following: *"We strongly believe that Cyprus is an island and that means that it is one natural system, so starting from there we say that the divide is contra-natura. Whatever is contra-natura cannot last, so the divide should not last."* (interview 8). Another informant

highlighted the economic benefits as well as regional benefits: "*There have been many studies showing that a solution will bring economic benefits to both sides (...) Cyprus becomes a stability hub.*" *(interview 6).* Another two organizations voiced their frustration at the passport scandals and other situations taking place on the island and called it corrupt, one informant stating the situation as follows:

> "*Because our leaders here in Cyprus now I mean today they are, some have been before, in the North as well, they are corrupted, they use their power not for the benefit of the people but for their benefit. If you follow the news in Cyprus, you have heard about the corruption with them selling the passports to a lot of gangsters, people who belong to the mafia abroad etc. and getting millions for this.*" *(interview 5).*

This was again mentioned by another informant who discussed how corruption sustains the status-quo:

> "*This system cannot be sustained. And I think what we have been saying from the very beginning, which was the division and corruption go hand in hand. It is finally understood by many people, finally, because we have been saying that the division creates fertile ground for unsuccessful and corrupt politicians and systems to sustain. Because in the South and in the North the division creates its own infrastructure. It creates its own political elite. It creates its own politicians, where they actually are elected with cheap nationalistic narratives rather than bringing solutions to the problems of the country.*" *(interview 6).*

Regional escalations, COVID-19 and scandals

The following section will focus on different themes within the experiences of the CSOs during the COVID-19 crisis and the escalations of tensions in the region between Greece and Turkey. From questions surrounding these events, several themes were highlighted by the informants. These surround the political experiences regarding the health crisis, the perceived division of people during the health crisis and the role of politics within this division, as well as the effects that both COVID-19 and the regional tensions have had on the activities and therewith potential of the organization to live up to its goals.

Political situation

Regarding the politics within the last two years, different points were stated by the informants of this study. Five out of the eight participating CSOs have explicitly stated that they have perceived the health crisis that COVID-19 introduced as a political issue first, and a health issue later. This was explained through the closing of the crossings from the North to the South. The informants stated that this was a political decision rather than a public health-driven decision, as the island had not seen its first case yet by the time of the closing of the crossings. One informant stated: "*It is very difficult for us to say that covid is only a health issue; it is also a*

political issue and it is also something that comes and strengthens the political differences" *(Interview 1).* This last part of the statement was underlined by six of the eight organizations. The strengthening of the political differences between both sides of the border appears to be at the core of the frustration that these six organizations put forward with relating COVID-19 to peacebuilding.

The political leadership from both sides was also brought forward with relation to disappointment. Two organizations stated that they had been disappointed with the lack of coordination and cooperation from both sides to work together amidst the COVID-19 crisis. An informant stated:

> *"But the answer to the virus, do you want to make it jointly, you know, across the divide, because it is actually very easy you know, to protect an island from a pandemic (…) they decided to do it like they do not live on the same island, like they took two completely different countries, so they closed the crossing points." (interview 1).*

Additionally, six CSOs stated that the COVID-19 crisis gave the political leadership more power to be divisive and further deepen the differences between the North and the South. One informant mentioned that they believe this to be the idea behind closing the borders:

> *"I do believe that our president at the very beginning with covid, he used covid to close the gates between the North and the South. Also, the new president now in the North he has the same culture more or less as our president, so they are using covid not to let the people come and go between the North and the South" (interview 5).*

This sentiment was mentioned again in the sixth interview by an informant: "*But it is also a very sad coincidence that it created an excuse for those who are against contact of the two communities that they enjoyed these pleasures.".* The "pleasures" at the end refers to the crossing of the borders. Furthermore, the same informant highlighted that the health crisis also has consequences for the political leadership of the future as they mentioned that the people's focus shifted away from the continuous focus on the conflict and its resolution: "*I think covid made them start thinking along the lines of the pandemic rather than trying to think about what's going to happen after this".*

Two CSOs also mentioned that they felt like the public could learn something from the approaches taken by the political leadership when it comes to the handling of crises and emergencies. An informant from an environmental CSO stated:

> *"As an organization that focuses on how the political situation affects emergency responses and emergency crises, we were disheartened by the political situation (…) so, I think that people and especially us, we got a very important lesson as to how, you know the real time beta-test on how the political situation affects crises, how it prevents their proper approaching to*

theses crises properly, and it gives us a clear road on how to move forward”
(interview 2).

Another informant believes that this is not the first instance in which the Cypriot public was shown how political leadership can negatively affect the population: *“Therefore, the latest covid we believe has proven once more, that at times of crisis people realize it even better that the division creates a very negative environment to, for the wellbeing of the people as a whole”* *(interview 6).*

The elections in the North were brought up multiple times as an extra factor in the frustration of the CSOs. The hindrance they felt with the election of Ersin Tatar has to do with the stance he has regarding the peace process and relations to Turkey, as the following informant stated: “*In fact, some people argue that the reason why Mr. Akinci who lost the elections (…) it is also because of the fact that people are very vulnerable, and they needed support, and then Turkey openly supported the other candidate, so they did not want to maybe challenge that.” (interview 6).* This vulnerability is not something new. The international community does not recognize the North, therewith making international help with regards to COVID-19 more difficult. Turkey was described as the perceived stable partner that would help. This election deepened the divide in the opinion of several CSOs as it included the nationalist narrative that was already present in the South but had not been elected in the North until this moment. Speaking about the effects it had on the morale of the organization and the outlook to the future, one informant said: “*And then with the elections in the North kind of going on a different nationalist kind of side. You kind of felt that the politics are kind of pulling us further apart than kind of closer than we are getting or that we were hoping to be going” (interview 3).* Furthermore, the ties that the new leader in the North has expressed to have with Turkey are of concern to several CSOs. One informant described the situation in which Ersin Tatar was asked what he thought about the resolution of the Cyprus problem: “*So, he says, what do you think about the solution? Whatever Turkey says he said. For me, it is not acceptable” (interview 4).*

Division of the Cypriots
All CSOs expressed their negative feelings toward the closing of the crossings. All CSOs expressed that they felt that this was creating a deeper division amongst the population of the island. Informants stated that “*That has also been kind of a big challenge for us” (interview 3)* in terms of continuing bi-communal operations, as well as expressing “*We have not visited the North or from the North to come to the South and this is also a very negative issue which we have here now” (interview 5).* Two CSOs highlighted the protests that took place, with one informant describing what happened:

> *“What was interesting was that there were demonstrations. (…) Activists from both sides attend their respective checkpoints and demonstrated. They cannot touch each other but they can see each other, you know, and it was a huge demonstration.” (interview 1).*

In some ways, this demonstration could be seen as a bi-communal activity. The demonstration had as its aim to reopen the crossings. Eventually, during a period of time, these crossings

would be reopened with a PCR test as a requirement for entering either side of the border. Operationally this meant that people working on the other side of the border could cross, with conditions: "*Now I have to take weekly PCR covid test to cross to the office, only for three days*" *(interview 7)*. These PCR tests are not free. The financial burden is hard to bear for families who might have wanted to cross the border for fun during the summer or for organizations wishing to have a meeting at the office with all of their staff or volunteers.

The main reason that the CSOs have mentioned for reopening the crossings is the necessity of contact and dialogue between the different communities. Five CSOs mentioned this as the biggest reason because of the benefits dialogue and contact have on the success of peacebuilding activities:

> *"The resumption of the crossings. This is very important. This is very crucial because one it bring the communities together, through the contact theory suggested bringing people together is the first step for them to understand each other for peace. Number three it also reinforces a common interdependence which is very important. We also support this. It is important to build economic interdependence between the communities. In a parallel step I think it is important that especially after the crossing start, we have to concentrate our efforts to bring people together, different groups together."* *(interview 6)*.

Several CSOs work based on a contact theory and have activities that brought people of all ages together, as stated by an informant:

> *"But it is very important that the crossings are open. Because if the crossings are not open then there is no contact. If there is no contact, then there is no, the stereotypes and cliché on each community will remain or will get stronger. It's very important that the contact is always maintained or even encouraged."* *(interview 1)*.

The CSOs are also aware that this hindrance in executing these types of activities can have an effect on the success they had so far. Seven CSOs mentioned that there is less communication between both sides of the divide. One informant mentioned that due to COVID-19 and all of their activities taking place online, they noticed a fatigue in the people's response to their digital activities: "*That took us a big step back because a lot of kids were really tired of having a lot of Zoom meetings basically because of school, and we were doing everything on Zoom, so it was tough getting everybody still engaged in the program*" *(interview 7)*. An additional problem that organizations were noticing was that it was more difficult to interest new people in their organizations: "*Sometimes it does feel like that we are not reaching anybody new. Whereas like a street event or a workshop will always bring in a couple of people who have never engaged with the topic before.*" *(interview 2)*.

The division of the people was further aided by the media. Three CSOs mentioned that they felt like there was more hate speech and divisive language being used in the media during these

times. One informant from an art-peacebuilding organization mentioned: "*Towards the end of 2020 when we started seeing more hate and more hate through language, or one-sided language being expressed in the media mostly." (interview 3)*. This organization used this to their advantage and created a project surrounding media and nationalist narratives. One organization mentioned that hate speech in general is an issue in Cyprus: "*There is a lot of hate speech in schools and in public and in public dialogue with politicians from both sides promoting hate speech." (interview 8)*. Because it is ominously present in daily lives of the Cypriots, the informant saw it as a hindrance to their peacebuilding activities – despite using an issue-based approach to their peacebuilding activities.

Tensions in the region

The escalations of tensions in the region were politically important, however, the majority (six) of the informants responded that their work was either completely unaffected or minimally affected by the tensions. One informant poignantly pointed out how the mechanism of affect works for Cyprus, Greece and Turkey: "*What happens with Greece/Turkey affects Cyprus, maybe not our everyday lives, but what happens in Cyprus has little to no effect on Greece/Turkey" (interview 4)*. The two CSOs that did feel the effect of regional escalations of tensions described the situation as affecting them negatively. They both highlighted how difficult it was to continue their work as usual:

> "*Whenever there is a negative or a whenever there is tensions or there is a negative environment, then we are also negatively affected. Constantly being targeted by extremists from both sides. Because in the times of tensions it is a lot about conflict and a lot about black and white, there are no greys in between. So, those who try to bring sides together and try to come up with an alternative narrative, those who do not subscribe to the official narratives are constantly being targeted which is making our work more difficult. (interview 6)*.

Both CSOs that saw this negative effect on their work, have a political focus within their activities. Other CSOs within this study do not solely focus with their activities on politics. Another CSO with a focus on youth, reported that it also affected them in a positive way, as they were able to create a safe environment "*for children to voice their fears regarding the escalations" (interview 7)*. One informant however did state that she saw the tensions in the region as hindering the potential for peace in Cyprus: "*I think the use of stress now in our region among Greece and Turkey of course they are real, but also for Cyprus I think they worked against an alibi for not doing what we could do for our country." (interview 8)*.

COVID-19

COVID-19 affected the CSOs in many different ways and not all negatively. Two informants felt like it gave new organizations the opportunity to establish themselves: "*This crisis gives a chance for new voices to come out in both communities in the island." (interview 1)*. Additionally, because of everything taking place online, one organization noticed that through their outreach on social media, they were able to bring in more youth into their organization:

"We changed especially during the covid our work from being on the street and then protesting to trying to create understanding among younger circles, trying to educate them. Trying to bring them different groups together, allying the different groups. So, this is how we shifted, especially the last one year." (interview 6).

Furthermore, five CSOs stated that the COVID-19 crisis had only made them more motivated to continue to bring people together, although it would not be in person. Some therefore, switched their activities to something completely different, as this sports CSO has done:

"I think it was a lot less about basketball, but the kids still needed some support around – whether it was like mental health or fun games or connecting with their coaches that they would normally have practice with. It became more of like a community, we became more of like a youth group." (interview 7).

For the organizations, many things changed during the periods of lockdown within the country. Their skills in adapting to different and challenging situations was put to the test. Four CSOs mentioned that they believe that the periods of lockdown have hindered their potential. Especially CSOs with a focus on dialogue or sports activities, that are more difficult or impossible to replace through digital means, mentioned the lockdown holding them back immensely and creating a feeling of uncertainty:

"We could not have our normal like summer camps that we usually have. So, we could not have that contact with the kids. We are still waiting to see if we are going to be able to do that this summer. Yes, we might be able to do something more communally but that is not the big vision of the organization. We need everybody to come, bi-communally." (interview 7).

On the other side, two organizations stated that COVID-19 did not hinder them in their activities as such. Some CSOs had still been in the early years of their existence and were still working on building momentum, however, creativity and adjusting their goals was key to adaptation to the new situation: "*We had to make different expectations and goals" (interview 7).* Furthermore, three CSOs saw a greater need for bi-communal activities during COVID-19, with two informants directly pointing towards the virus as being the reason for this increase.

Through COVID-19 restrictions in Cyprus, face-to-face meetings across the divide were impossible for a while. This meant that seven out of the eight organizations within this study, have switched to working online and therefore also holding their activities digitally. Different opinions were expressed regarding this change. Some informants mentioned that it was often much more difficult and took time to get everything to work and to have their audience learn the digital tools. An informant from a CSO that mainly focuses on helping civil society, as well as CSOs across the island, stated:

"Since 2020 we have been trying to unite them through covid, because through this all the physical activities could not be done, so we are trying to

get them to connect, the NGOs and activists, through our trainings online, digital competencies, which are key competences to keep on working as NGOs (…) we have been organizing many online tools trainings you know – how you can use social media how you can use new online tools. So, the people can still do their work across the divide, and this is something that is important." (interview 1).

However, as previously mentioned, the internet connection in the North is relatively unstable. This added to the difficulties for four CSOs. Furthermore, three CSOs felt that it was more difficult to bring in new people. One informant noted:

"It takes more out of us. Set up an event, get people to come to it, make sure that everything is working technically. It is just less, it has been harder to organize events, it has been harder to find people to come to them outside of the same five people. Sometimes it does feel like that we are not reaching anybody new (…) I think that online work, just by its nature tends to just bring like to like. So, you know, it's what we need to do right now. But I don't think anyone's particularly enjoying it." (interview 2).

However, this was not the case for all organizations. Two CSOs mentioned that they had been able to bring in new people stating that: "*As far as the political situation is going this way *informant uses one hand that moves to the right, and another that moves to the left* that pushes some kind of people, who are further into the activistic approach who wish to express a different message." (interview 3).* However, as a whole, it limited the organizations in reaching out to new people, and in the least severely limited their potential. Some CSOs have mentioned that they are concerned about the consequences of this lack of contact and what it could mean for peacebuilding on the island. As all of the organizations build on the contact of humans, whether during youth sports tournaments, workshops or creation of art installations – the loss of these activities does mean a loss in the effect of the work of the CSOs. However, this study does not seek to compare the effects of the different activities the CSOs have been undertaking in the last several years. It merely noticed this perceived difference by the organizations themselves.

Prospects for the future

The following section of the presentation of data will focus solely on future prospects for the CSOs. This is divided in the short-term prospects, which includes their opinions and feelings towards the 5+1 meeting held in late April between the guarantor powers the United Kingdom, Greece and Turkey, as well as the Turkish-Cypriot and Greek-Cypriot leadership. This meeting was guided by the UN and was to be seen as an exploratory meeting, towards possible future negotiations for a resolution to the Cyprus problem. Additionally, the role of politicians is discussed with relation to the future. As all CSOs would like to see the reunification of the island, the questions remain to them whether the current political leadership can lead the island towards this reunification. Finally, general prospects for the future are discussed and what this might mean for the organizations themselves.

Short-term future

Pessimism is one of the main sentiments seen throughout the perspectives for the future of the CSOs. Despite the longing for success in terms of a reunifying solution to the Cyprus problem, six organizations find it hard to be optimistic about the short-term future specifically. Five state that this is due to the past. Throughout all the past negotiations and peace attempts, something always happened to hinder the solution coming to existence. The pessimism is discussed by an informant who replied the following when asked about the (then) upcoming 5+1 meeting: "*This is actually, I suppose will be the last effort because we are discussing now 50 years, discussing the same matters, the same things but never coming to a solution.*" *(interview 5).* However, one informant stated: "*We believe that in 2021 and 2022 we need to, we will go back to where we left, which is a bi-communal bi-zonal federation.*" *(interview 6).* It should be noted that all CSOs in this study view reunification through a federal solution as the best, or in some cases, only option for the island. The underlying sentiment of most of the informants throughout the future section of the study, however, seemed to be uncertainty. As can be expected when speculating about something that has not yet taken place. However, the uncertainty seems to be built on the past and although contradictory – the uncertainty of the informants looks to be something they are quite certain about: "*anything can happen*".

Specifically, regarding the 5+1 meeting opinions are divided. Some see it in a positive light when looking at a potential beginning for reunification talks. This especially, as it is to be led by the UN, as explained by an informant:

> "*The 5+1 informal conference is an informal meeting that tries to see where the parties are standing on. The UN mandate on this is framed by the UN resolutions. And the UN resolution says that the UN mandate is to help sides to find a solution based on bi-communal bi-zonal federation.*" *(interview 6).*

Meaning that in the end, a solution would be reunification through a federation, as supported by all CSOs. Not all informants see this positive light. Some prefer to look to the past and cast a realist perspective on the statements regarding the meeting, saying: "*Even though politicians are meeting, that does not mean that everything is going to change that much.*" *(interview 7).* Some informants especially do not believe in a positive outcome because of the involvement of parties outside of the island, namely the guarantors the UK, Turkey, and Greece. The involvement of these parties is positive for some, stating that "*the only chance that we do believe that it will help is with huge pressure from EU and UN and other countries who want to see a solution.*" *(interview 5).* On the other side, informants stated their annoyance with outside involvement of the guarantor powers:

> "*It is becoming pretty clear that top-level negotiations between the presidents of the communities, and including the former colonizers and the UK, including you know Turkey and Greece, which you know, put their thumb on the scale of Cypriot affairs every time they can. It does not spell for an optimistic situation.*" *(interview 2)* "*Probably this Cyprus problem will be affected with the relations of the players in other fields. Meaning that somehow, they will have to solve the Cyprus problem because they will*

eventually have to solve their own problems in the bigger region. (...) but now they are bargaining on Cyprus because they have other bargains elsewhere and this is the biggest problem." (interview 6).

Both mentioned that the introduction of more actors in the conflict resolution talks will only add to differing interests. According to the informants the guarantor powers see the conflict as a part of the bigger picture, whilst the Cyprus problem is the big picture for the Northern and Southern communities.

Political leadership

According to the informants, politicians play an important role in the future of the CSOs but also in the future of the conflict. Their behavior and the decisions they take influence CSOs' hopes for the future. For example, as previously mentioned, the closing of the checkpoints during COVID-19 times, was seen by several organizations as a political decision, not as a public health-oriented decision. Two organizations state that they believe that these actions, from both leaders on both sides of the divide, will shape the general public's expectations for after the pandemic. An example of this is the prediction of an informant regarding the actions of politicians: "*This propaganda is there for both communities, and because of the leadership now, whatever we did not see in the last five years we will definitely be seeing more of." (interview 1).* The informant effectively mentioned that they expected what had been happening behind the scenes would be more out in the open in the future.

As previously alluded to, the general level of trust in politicians with regards to the past, present and future situation for Cyprus, is very low. Six organizations state that they do not think that the current leaders across the divide are willing to create a solution. One informant described the situation as follows:

> *"I also think that we have leaders on both sides that we do not trust, they have a common agenda and that this is trying to find a common solution for Cyprus? I think that is not the case. I mean, despite what they are saying, I think that they are not working towards this direction." (interview 3).*

The informant mentioned the current stance of the political leaders across the divide. Both have stated their interest in a two-state solution, going against the wishes of the CSOs and the UN resolution on the reunification of Cyprus. Several informants stated that they currently see "*no real political will to solve this issue" (interview 8)* from both sides. One informant went as far as wondering out loud whether the 5+1 meeting is "*a political show or just to show off that 'we are discussing'" (interview 8).* One organization stated to have lost hope in the "knight in shining armor" role that exists for political leaders in conflict resolution and stated:

> *"We have to stop waiting for leaders to come and save us, because it is not in their interest (...) especially now with a president in the North who has been you know, very heavily influenced by Ankara and is pro-partition basically. A president in the South who is pro-partition basically. But who is*

you know, a little more quiet about it. So, it is hard to be optimistic." (interview 2).

The same informant critiqued the current mode of negotiations and called for a change in that aspect, stating that the high-level dialogues that have been used in the past have not yet resulted in a resolution and therefore, "*I think that it's time to rethink how this island is going to be reunited" (interview 2)*. Another critique that is found amongst the CSOs is lack of political support. Although none of the CSOs are politically aligned some state that they would like to see a general support of the NGO sector. As one informant put it: "*the NGOs cannot have the role that is expected from them to have because they don't have the resources, they don't have the resources, and they don't have the political support." (interview 8)*. What the island is currently missing in terms of leadership is described by an informant as:

> "Having the leaders on both sides to have a common language and sign the solution (...) The Cyprus problem has different sides, these sides have been discussed and discussed for the last 40-50 years, what is missing now is a political decision." (interview 5).

The informant furthermore stated that they would like to see leaders uphold their responsibility to the people and the next generation. Stating that the need in Cyprus currently is for leaders who are willing to solve the problems.

Conflict and CSOs' future

Feelings such as uncertainty, pessimism, confusion and hope are to be found in the following section. Informants described their perspectives for the future with regards to the conflict and the work of their organization. Four CSOs stated explicitly that they do not see the future brightly. Initial statements showed a lot about the underlying feelings of the informants as they used words such as "*black" (interview 8)* and "*we are not holding our breath (...) it is hard to be optimistic" (interview 2)*. What is noticeable in the interviews, is that informants begin with a more negative statement regarding the future and then swiftly move towards a sentiment more aligned with what was said in interview 2: "*I hope I am wrong"*. All CSOs stated that they want to believe in a positive outcome. The usage of 'want' in this sentence is important. Some informants use it explicitly "*I can see the communities, (...) they are trying to reach out even more you know. They are trying to find those bridges, I guess. I want to believe, and I want to have faith." (interview 1)*. However, the past cannot be forgotten and there is no reason to believe that anything will be different this time, with the current leaders across the divide. The faith that the CSOs have in the willingness of the public in peace should not be forgotten. One informant from a CSO that works mainly with women stated:

> "At the end I think so many people realize that we have to, we can live together, because we have so many similarities in culture and behaviors and we have so many similarities with our differences, but we can live all together in this island." (interview 4).

Which is why another CSO stated that their main goal with their activities is "*to build a society believing in Cyprus, believing in Cypriots, believing in the peace, in the building peace in Cyprus in the two communities.*" (interview 5).

All organizations have stated that despite a possible solution not being what they would like to see, they will continue their work with creating understanding across the divide and empowering different groups of people:

> "*I will continue to work with my Turkish-Cypriot counterparts and the organization will be there and I will do anything possible to empower myself and my friends and my partners. If the outcome if fortunate enough to be a reunification, that would be a very big blessing, if not then I will continue to go for it, I am determined, as long as I am on this island I am determined*" (interview 4).

This sentiment is shared amongst several informants, with some even stating that this adversity of the scandals, the COVID-19 pandemic and regional escalations of tensions, have only given them more energy to work even harder: "*I guess it has been a bit of a bumpy road. But we remain committed to these principles and trying our best however we can as an organization and individuals to contribute to, to a solution.*" (interview 3). Stating that they "*will keep doing what we are doing, against all odds*" (interview 8). One informant highlighted that if they are to stop their efforts, nothing would happen:

> "*We will never give up, never give up. Sometimes it is very tiring very exhausting, very discouraging (...). There is the thought if we do not do anything, if we do not speak if we do not come together then nothing will happen. By coming together, by sustaining the group, by sustaining the structure, there is a possibility there is hope, there is a chance.*" (interview 4).

The organizations also highlight their own part in the process, by staying active and ensuring that the public knows that they are still there:

> "*This is where (name CSO) also plays a big role, that we are still here and we are working with the generation that want to see that improvement and they want to build that better Cyprus.*" (interview 7) "*It is even more important in the sense that in the time of pessimism we need to keep the fire alive. We need to keep the voice alive, and I think this is why despite the fact that we are maybe not necessarily the big political party or a big group with big funds, it is important to continue to exist.*" (interview 6).

Regarding specific feelings expressed by the informants, the negatives were more outspoken than the positives. In the end, the positive during these times is to look to the future and remain hopeful for the outcome that the CSOs wish to see. As this future does not seem near to the majority of the CSOs in this study, the negatives are more present. A sentiment of pessimism

towards the future was present for seven out of the eight CSOs: "*We are not very optimistic that it will get better" (interview 2)*. Reasons for this pessimism can also be found within the state of the organization, as an informant mentioned: "*Our future is not so positive, I do not see it so positive because we are not so strong let's say." (interview 5)*. Additionally, with the occurrence of the COVID-19 pandemic, uncertainty and confusion also entered the minds of the informants. Uncertainty for the future in general, as well as for the future of the organization as some CSOs have been used to solely having their activities take place face-to-face. Because of this uncertainty towards the future in general, with relation to politics and the COVID-19 pandemic, a lot of confusion is found amongst the CSOs. Four CSOs stated that they do not know what to expect for the future: "*I am personally quite confused whether you know whether it is all ending and that it is all downhill from here". (interview 3)*. The confusion and uncertainty for one organization came forward because of the tensions and instability in the region and the COVID-19 pandemic with not knowing what to plan for and when their events and activities will be executed, it appears to be difficult to continue to plan activities:

> "*I think it put it more to not, how can I say this, place of unknown rather than like we had even though it was bad, I am not saying that I prefer it, but it was like checkpoints and everything, we knew as an organization how to act around it and do our events. But now in the place, we do not know about the future and it is always like it affects us in some way that the political aspect of it as well, like the talks that they have as well, it is unstable as well. So, (…) I think we were more confident about planning our future, before COVID and the tensions, I guess. But now it's like 'eh we will say that we will do X event in the summer' but are we going to do it? We do not know. (…) We're living into the unknown, basically." (interview 7)*.

Discussion

This section will discuss the data that was gathered during interviews with peacebuilding CSOs in Cyprus. The results of which are helpful in understanding their current needs and desires from different actors, as well as in which ways the recent challenges have impacted their activities and work in general. The section is divided into different subsections which are linked to the research questions mentioned in the introduction.

How the past shaped the present

This section will discuss how the past shaped the present for the CSOs. Several points were brought up during the semi-structured interviews. The results of the interviews with the CSOs painted a clear picture with connections to current experiences. The points that were brought up when asked about past events showed the pessimism and division that is still visible today.

Several CSO representatives mentioned the isolation of the North as a driver or motivation to continue their work. Isolation because of the fear of accidental validation from the South or the wish for the South to remain the ideal partner to international organizations and other countries. This isolation and exclusion create inequalities on the island which in turn creates division between the North and the South, as there are no equal opportunities. This effectively accumulates to the South working against the bi-communal CSOs and was shown through the experiences of being called 'traitors' when reaching out to people across the divide. This rhetoric has been used for many years in relation to the 'other' of the island. Looking at it from a political perspective, given that it is the political elites using this rhetoric, it is the political elites working against the low- and mid-level leaders, harming Lederach's peacebuilding track (1997). As Kanol (2010) states, the political sphere has used this divisive rhetoric to strengthen their own constituency against the 'other' – keeping a solution at bay.

The overall disappointment in politicians and their actions and promises shone through clearly. Past negotiations and events such as the Crans Montana talks, and the UN Mandated Annan Plan and consecutive referenda established a sense of being 'fed up' with peace in the sense that it appears unattainable through top-level negotiations: in turn creating trust issues between CSOs and politicians. Here the necessity of the inclusion of lower-level and mid-level leaders, as described in Lederach's (1997) pyramid following his peacebuilding theory is highlighted. Previous research has shown that CSOs have invaluable potential to bring to conflict resolution and its sustainability (Barnes, 2009; Kew & John, 2008). Examples of which are the communication that CSOs can facilitate between conflict parties, such as in the case of South Africa and Northern Ireland (Barnes, 2009, p. 139). Moreover, the CSOs have no governing power to gain from a political settlement and can therefore be useful in public participation in potential settlements or peace negotiations (ibid). The UN Mediated Annan Plan referendum is an example in which CSOs have been able to make a difference in the North whilst CSOs in the South were publicly hindered by political and religious leaders (Kanol, 2010). Specifically, religious leaders are an interesting point of departure given their relevance to civil society in

the South, one could speculate along the same lines as Kanol (2010, p. 39), about the outcome of the referendum should religious leaders have publicly supported the other option.

Considering the length of the conflict, these are solid trust issues and cannot be ignored. Additionally, according to several CSOs, the people across the divide appear to no longer be interested in straight-forward events focusing solely on peace, with issue-based peacebuilding being used more and more on the island. Previous research states that this shift is not a bad thing, as issue-based CSOs still maintain the same aim, in their peacebuilding, only their approach has changed. Bisarya et al. (2017, p. 269) states that including such organisations in transitional periods within a conflict can create fundamental reforms which are likely to be in line with the needs of citizens.

This negativity when looking back at the past, carries on into the present. When the foundation of trust in politicians and a solution to the conflict is shaky, because this trust has thus far been fruitless, it can be difficult to build a positive future. These results are undoubtedly linked to the CSOs perspectives of the future. The degree of negativity was both expected and unexpected, considering that these CSOs are working towards a different future, one that includes reunification and requires hopefulness and faith in the top-level negotiations, i.e., the political elites in which the CSOs have very little faith. When following Lederach (1997) the cooperation between the political elite and the mid- and low-level leaders is necessary, which, based on these results of a view of the past, might prove difficult without a change in attitudes from the political elites towards CSOs and grass-roots movements, and the other way around.

Experiences and descriptions of recent challenges

The interviews highlighted the negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic most of all, with the closing of the borders and its hindrance to peacebuilding activities across the divide as well as its dividing consequences for the population. Although the tensions in the region had little to no effect on the CSOs activities, they still added to the experienced troubles of the last three years.

The COVID-19 pandemic portrayed yet again, according to the CSOs, how their political leadership will take each opportunity it gets to divide the island, instead of working together – no matter whether the situation surrounds cooperation towards conflict resolution or protecting its citizens from a virus. This discourse is expected considering the ethnic nature of the Cyprus conflict. Ioannou (2020b) suggests that the closing of several border checkpoints had been an attempt from the South to divert the attention from the public health system to the peace and conflict resolution process. The North responded by closing additional checkpoints which left the island completely divided. From other conflicts such as the Bosnia-Herzegovina conflict, studies have shown that the politics of identity and the division that this can create is not conducive to peacebuilding and conflict resolution; it can in fact heighten tensions which in turn can re-escalate the conflict (Levy, 2014). Furthermore, the actions from the political leadership show little will towards conflict resolution of the Cyprus conflict. Considering the necessity of political will for the resumption of negotiation talks, the lack of political will for

cooperation across the divide on a national health crisis does not bode well for the current state of the Cyprus conflict. Following the limited ripeness theory, a mutually enticing opportunity could have been found in the COVID-19 pandemic considering the possibility of no level of cooperation turning into a mutually hurting stalemate (Coleman et al., 2008). However, this theory was disproven as the North and South did not cooperate as was seen in several other conflicts (Ide, 2021).

The closing of the borders consequently meant that peacebuilding activities would be less effective, as CSOs described the situation as being "*more difficult to reach out to people outside of the normal attendance" (interview 2)*. As most CSOs follow the idea of establishing contacts and relationships across the divide, they experienced the closing of the borders as nearly impossible to continue with this intergroup contact theory and yield results like they would have before the pandemic. The contact theory works from the basis that conflict does not destroy the possibility for relationships and cooperation across conflict lines. It does not attempt to force positive relationships but instead aims to show the possibility of peaceful cooperation as a choice for participants (Blagojevic, 2007, p. 556). The effects of the closing of the borders on CSOs contact-building activities should not be understated. Previous research has shown that without contact between the population of parties in conflict, the opportunity arises for intolerance, ignorance and resentment to be maintained and could even be intensified (Whyte, 1990). Additionally, Levy (2014, p. 80), has shown that physical separation between the population of two conflict parties hindered the level of tolerance that peacebuilding measures were attempting to establish. These arguments are specifically true for ethnic conflicts such as the Cyprus conflict. The lack of contact eventually might push people towards familiarity as is found on their side of the divide, out of fear of the unknown or plain ignorance (Bizumić, 2012). Consequences of which might be a lack of sympathy for the other's situation and dehumanization of the 'other' (ibid, p. 49; Blagojevic, 2007). An alternative to the lack of contact would be the imaginary intergroup contact activities, in which positive contact with a person from the North or South would be imagined (Husnu & Crisp, 2010). However, considering the aforementioned difficulty from the CSOs to bring in new people to their online activities, such activities might be difficult to organize. Kassoumeh (2020) stated that a 'blended' approach to online peacebuilding could be a solution once COVID-19 restrictions have been lifted. The 'blended' approach combines online peacebuilding with an on-site location where people can participate in an activity together; online and face-to-face.

Additionally, some CSOs had to completely change their activities in order to continue existing. Considering that activities including people from across the divide were impossible, activities were moved to online spaces such as Zoom and social media. Although some CSOs experienced the shift in focus to social media to be an asset to their activities, considering that they may have reached an audience of teens that they might not have reached with their usual activities, other CSOs stated that this change was harmful to their peacebuilding goals. This last group specifically contains CSOs who have on an older target audience. This change was not something that the CSOs were prepared for and therefore, despite their best efforts, might not have contributed to peacebuilding in the most effective way possible - or at all. Moreover, online peacebuilding is heavily built upon trust considering the possibilities of recording of

meetings and possible repercussions of these. Additionally, marginalized people with limited access to internet might not be able to participate in these online activities. Kassoumeh (2020) shows the opportunities for online peacebuilding that have occurred during COVID-19 and highlighted the financial perspective – stating that online peacebuilding is cheaper for organizations which in turn could provide opportunities for expansion of activities. However, several CSOs within this study have stated to not be funded consistently at all, meaning that a monthly subscription would be a burden for these organizations.

The CSOs mostly continued their activities, albeit online and for some in another shape or form that they had not originally planned to use. Several CSOs stated that this hurt their organization's goals and saw potential for it hurting their past peacebuilding activities. Considering again, that with the closing of the borders and the stop on contact across the divide, divisions had plenty room to grow. Given the limitations and timing of this study, it is not possible to conclude whether this has actually happened. However, CSOs underlined that it was not possible for them to cease activities completely, something which Kassoumeh (2020) emphasizes the importance of.

Effects of the escalations of tensions in the region were not experienced to the same degree as COVID-19 was. CSOs stated that this situation had more effects on politics than the day-to-day lives of the people of Cyprus. Although a youth focused CSO mentioned youth talking amongst each other about the tensions in the region, these events did not impact the activities of the CSOs.

Considering the variety of CSOs that took part in this study and the impact they have stated to have experienced of mainly the COVID-19 pandemic, it is difficult to see the situation in a positive light for peacebuilding in Cyprus. The effects of COVID-19 on the organizations cannot be understated, a full stop to their usual activities and a change to online settings that none were truly ready for, have harmed the impact of their peacebuilding and community-building activities. Bottom-up peacebuilding is highly necessary for protracted social conflicts and can and does play an important role in the sustainability of a settlement agreement; should one be reached (Abiew & Keating, 2000). A weakened, isolated civil society with divisive political leadership like the recent years have shown to be on both sides of the divide, is not conducive to the creation of sustainable peace (Kelman, 2010).

The future and its potential

When analyzing the flow of the interviews, the results of the CSOs foresight of the future is not surprising in its negativity. At the time of interviewing there was a 5+1 meeting to look forward to, which at time of writing has taken place. Main sentiments regarding the future of the Cyprus conflict are pessimism and little faith towards the current political leadership and their willingness to further conflict resolution and cooperate on peacebuilding. Important to highlight is that all CSOs see the conflict's future solely settled by a federal solution, following the UN resolution 716 established in 1991 and reiterated again in 2021 through the UN Security Council in resolution 2561.

Based on what the informants have stated in their interviews, the overall sentiment of pessimism regarding the future is not unexpected. The CSOs are working towards peacebuilding, whilst the main current actors responsible for conflict resolution cannot cooperate with each other and are not open to the UN resolution on the reunification of Cyprus. This sentiment was highlighted again from the Northern political leadership and Turkey during the 5+1 meeting in late April 2021 (Reuters, 2021). The Southern political leadership stated to be open to discuss reunification following the UN resolution (Reuters, 2021). Secretary General Guterres concluded from the 5+1 meeting of April 2021, that there currently does not exist enough common ground to move forward to formal negotiations (United Nations, 2021). Another 5+1 meeting will be held in the future. Several CSOs had stated before the meeting took place that they expected this outcome considering the politicians stance in the media. Additional concern and hope were stated regarding the involvement of the guarantor powers in the meeting. Moreover, when looking at the description of the past by the CSOs, it is clear that this pessimism towards political leadership in relation to conflict resolution has been present for decades with little change.

Despite the lack of faith in political willingness, CSOs have also stated to question the integrity of their politicians on either side of the divide, mentioning corruption scandals or other countries' influence over their politicians. These are serious allegations that place doubt from civil society on the politicians' ability to do what they have been elected to do. This is not the sturdy foundation one would like to see from a country attempting conflict resolution or peacebuilding, considering that reunification would entail a political settlement that must be agreed to by the citizens of the island. Corruption is considered an obstacle in peacebuilding efforts as it undermines the legitimacy of public institutions and additionally increases the risk of renewed violence (Le Billon, 2008; Zaum & Cheng, 2011).

For the CSOs themselves, there is a level of hopefulness to be found. Hopefulness that once the COVID-19 pandemic is over, they will be able to return to their usual activities as well as hopefulness that the political leadership might surprise them with a solution to the Cyprus problem. No matter what solution might be found, all CSOs have stated their willingness to continue to bridge the divide and bring the communities closer together. Whether this hopefulness is inexhaustive remains to be seen in the coming years, with no resolution in short-term sight. However, it is important to remember that some CSOs have existed for decades and are likely to continue their efforts – should the past failed negotiations not have stopped them, it is unlikely that anything will. Throughout the interviews, CSOs have stated to believe in a peaceful form of change to the conflict. Azar et al., (1978) believes this to be unlikely in protracted social conflicts; intermittent tensions and instability such as regional escalations between Greece and Turkey and COVID-19 have some effect yet in the end the status quo remains.

Conclusion

The following section will firstly answer the main research question as posed in the introduction of this study. Secondly, theoretical implications of the study's results are discussed as well as recommended further studies. The research question guiding this study is: *How have the recent challenges, such as COVID-19 and escalations of tensions between Greece and Turkey, impacted bi-communal CSOs in Cyprus?*

The phenomenon this study aimed to research had been the recent challenges that the peacebuilding focused CSOs of Cyprus have faced in the last couple of years, namely the COVID-19 pandemic and the regional escalations of tensions. This phenomenon of peacebuilding during a crisis was described by the CSOs as challenging at the least, and hurtful for their organisations at the most. The escalations of tensions did not impact the CSOs activities, however it did affect the island's politics which in turn affect the work of the CSOs. COVID-19 impacted the CSOs in ways that previous difficulties over the last decades had not matched. The closing of the borders meant that CSOs could not continue their bi-communal activities and saw a decline, or in some cases, stop in new participants in their online activities. This almost pause in impactful peacebuilding activities is harmful for the bottom-up peacebuilding approach that is needed in combination with a political settlement. The CSOs are rightfully concerned about the divisive language portrayed in the media and how the period of no contact would affect relationships across the divide. The closing of the borders further highlighted for the CSOs that this political agreement for the conflict resolution of Cyprus is not in the short-term future. The political leadership has shown in the 5+1 meeting of late April 2021 that there is not enough common ground to begin a formal peace process – adding yet another blow to peacebuilding morale for the CSOs. Despite the negative experiences from the past, the recent challenges and the lack of political will from the current political elite of Cyprus, the interviewed CSOs are determined to continue their activities.

Theoretical implications

In relation to previous research, several theoretical implications are revealed. Firstly, the theory of bottom-up peacebuilding. As Lederach (1997) has stated, bottom-up peacebuilding is important to conflict resolution and transformative peacebuilding. However, this statement entails the cooperation of all tracks – something that is absent in the case of Cyprus. This was further highlighted in the top-down 5+1 meetings which did not include mid- or lower-level leadership and even brought in a former colonial power. This study has shown that the will from CSOs exists to cooperate with the political elite, however this does not work the other way around with politicians referring to the CSOs as "*traitors*". Furthermore, when analyzing the four ways of impact on a conflict (personal, relational, structural and cultural), this study underlines that through the separation of citizens through the closing of the checkpoints, cultural and structural differences were given room to grow as well as a decrease in relational impacts because of the limitations of peacebuilding activities experienced by the CSOs. Additionally, the conflict flow followed Lederach (2015) as despite challenges such as low

levels of political cooperation during the COVID-19 pandemic and closing of the checkpoints; political leadership agreed to the 5+1 meeting which emphasizes again that the platform for continuation of conflict resolution exists; however, the current lack of inclusion of mid- and lower-level leadership, such as CSOs, could be an opportunity for future meetings. The current perspective on the Cyprus problem lists all things that liberal peace receives critique for: the exclusion of local organizations, inclusion of guarantor powers, and a top-down approach which has a history of failing to meet the needs of citizens. The term local ownership comes to mind. As one informant stated during the interviews is that they wish to see a Cypriot-led Cypriot peace process, instead of the current ones which again include outside actors such as the guarantor powers. This divergence between views that guarantor powers may hold regarding the Cyprus problem and the local population, will further complicate the peace process. Not to mention the other interests these actors have in the broader region. As stated by Donais (2009), this theory of local ownership is academically accepted and rarely practiced. Perhaps it is time to listen to academic critique and attempt another avenue of conflict resolution for the Cyprus problem.

Theories on (intergroup) contact in peacebuilding in ethnic conflict affected countries have further emphasized the importance of contact in situations where ethnic separation has taken place (Blagojevic, 2007). As Cyprus is generally ethnically divided as well, the implications of this study underline the concerns of the CSOs regarding the observed low levels of new participation in their continued peacebuilding efforts during the closing of the checkpoints. Whether this closing of checkpoints has had any effect on the stance of the North towards the South and vice versa could be an interesting avenue for further studies.

Additional suggestions for future research mostly surround the effectiveness of online peacebuilding in general and during a pandemic where most people's lives have continued solely online. It would be interesting to find out whether this lowers the obstacle for new participants or perhaps works as a factor against participation. In general terms, the lack of contact within peacebuilding activities based on contact theory is a theme that deserves more research, especially in times of physical separation.

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Appendix 1: Empirical Data Collection

Interviews

1. Semi-structured interview with Civic Space with two informants – 9/2/2021 – Online (Zoom)
2. Semi-structured interview with Avli with one informant – 10/2/2021 – Online (Zoom)
3. Semi-structured interview with Visual Voices with two informants – 11/2/2021 – Online (Zoom)
4. Semi-structured interview with Hands Across the Divide with two informants – 12/2/2021 – Online (Zoom)
5. Semi-structured interview with New Cyprus Association with one informant – 15/2/2021 – Online (Zoom)
6. Semi-structured interview with Unite Cyprus Now with one informant – 15/2/2021 – Online (Zoom)
7. Semi-structured interview with PeacePlayers Cyprus with two informants – 17/2/2021 – Online (Zoom)
8. Semi-structured interview with AKTI with one informant – 18/2/2021 – Online (Zoom)

Interview guide

Below some questions and themes discussed within the semi-structured interviews are outlined

Theme 1: Past events
- What kind of activities did the CSO undertake?
    - Questions regarding organization of the activities
    - Questions regarding reactions to the activities
- In what way are the activities / projects important to peacebuilding or contributing to peacebuilding?
- Opinion of the conflict status of the island during the past
- Possible changes in perspective for the future throughout the existence of the CSO

Theme 2: COVID-19 and escalations
- Effect of and experiences during the escalations of tensions on the work of the CSO
- Effect of and experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic on the work of the CSO
- Change in need for certain activities?
- Did something not work in the way that you thought it would?
- Was the CSO able to live up to its potential, fulfill its goals?

Theme 3: Prospects for the future
- What does the CSO see for the future of Cyprus?

- Have prospects for the future changed due to COVID-19 or the escalation of tensions in the region?
- Opinions regarding the 5+1 meeting?