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FACEBOOK: AN EMERGING ARENA FOR POLITICS OF SELF-DETERMINATION IN NORTHERN CYPRUS?

Abstract:

The present article aims to expand scholarship on the political role of social media by focusing on the case of Facebook and the self-determination claims of Turkish Cypriots vis-à-vis Turkey. Drawing upon a virtual ethnography of relevant Facebook sites and groups, this article scrutinises whether social media offer an innovative public platform for the politics of self-determination or on-line claims are in reality formed and negotiated in the same manner as the offline ones. The article concludes that Turkish Cypriots' Facebook activism may very well be for strengthening their community, shielding their distinct characteristics from mainland Turkey and raising their self-esteem, rather than indicating demands for complete autonomy in the traditional political sense of the word and/or statehood.

Keywords: Turkish Cypriots, social media, political activism, Turkey, Erdogan, AKP, virtual ethnography

INTRODUCTION

Social media platforms have indisputably (trans-)formed the nature of private and public communication (Dijk, 2013, p.7). They have also enabled spaces for new dynamic of social and political power for non-mainstream text producers against the discourses of established institutions (Kelsey and Bennett 2014 cited in Khosravini and Zia, 2014, p. 757). Mobilisation hence has become more horizontal and structured around shared interests and concerns in contrast to the top-down model in mainstream mass communication (Eickelman and Anderson, 2003). Facebook for instance together with twitter with respect to their symbolic and virtual constructions have emerged in the last decade as innovative communication tools for political claims. However, it is debatable whether the social media possess an enabling power in their own right to generate genuine political activism.

The recent self-determination claims emanating from within the Turkish Cypriot community against Turkey's hegemony on the *de facto* Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus ('TRNC') through facebook constitute in this sense an intriguing phenomenon. This is mainly because traditionally, Turkish Cypriots have regarded Turkey as a motherland, to which they have also been grateful for creating a safe territory they much longed for, especially since the 1950s, when inter-communal fighting started on the island. The longing for the arrival of Turkish

troops was even often expressed in stories, poetry and songs, “as a longing for the lover who would come to rescue his suffering bride” (Byrant, 2008, p. 415).

Since the late 1990s, however, a significant number of middle-class, especially young, Turkish Cypriots have started to re-articulate concerns about the Turkish hegemony on the island and to emphasize *Kıbrıslılık* (Cypriotness) as their ‘genuine’ identity (Hatay and Bryant, 2008; Akcali, 2011). They have also supported a rapprochement with the Greek Cypriots in the form of a federal structure in Cyprus and European Union membership – the latter materialised in 2004. The 1990s also coincided with the mass arrival of Turkish working class immigrants from the mainland – an arrival made possible by ‘TRNC’ policy of not imposing any passport control for those coming from Turkey. Well-educated and well-off Turkish Cypriots even started to make claims during this period about their culturally and even ethnically difference from the Turks, emphasising an affinity with white Europeans based on claims of lineage with Venetians and Lusignans (a French dynasty), who ruled the island before the Ottoman conquest in 1571. However, as Hatay and Bryant (2008, p. 431) aptly observe, these Turkish Cypriot claims can be considered quite deceptive, for *Kıbrıslılık* does not necessarily imply a common identity for the entire island, but the resurgence of Turkish Cypriot demands for self-determination versus Turkey’s domination, in order to accentuate their distinct insular identity. In particular, social media, especially Facebook, the platform most used by Turkish Cypriots (HaberKibris, 2017), have become a significant medium through which Turkish Cypriots have started disseminating such claims and re-enact a uniquely Cypriot memory and identity.

The aim of the present paper hence is to analyse this phenomenon and understand whether such virtual practices bring a novelty to the ways in which a rather complex and ambivalent case of self-determination claim is negotiated. To achieve this purpose, I will first conceptually discuss the impact of social media on the formation of collective political claims and activism. I will then examine the complex dynamics of Turkish Cypriot identity’s (trans)formation since the island’s partitioning in 1974, and the ensuing self-determination claims. Next, I will demonstrate the ways in which Facebook serves as the virtual platform of Turkish Cypriots’ current political aspirations and performances. This will be done thanks to a virtual (online) ethnography which extends the ethnographic scrutiny and methods to settings where interactions between people are digitally mediated rather than face-to-face. Three time periods will be analysed: 2009, the rather nascent years of Facebook; 2013, a period when

Turkey experiences the consolidation of the Justice and Development Party's (AKP) hegemony and emerges as a regional trade power in times when Greece and the Republic of Cyprus found themselves in financial crises; and 2018, a period which marks the consolidation of the authoritarian turn in Turkey. Finally, drawing upon my empirical data, I will offer an in-depth analysis on whether social media in general, and Facebook, in particular, as a symbolic and virtual construction creates an innovative public platform for politics of self-determination.

SOCIAL MEDIA: WHAT IMPACT DOES IT HAVE ON THE FORMATION OF COLLECTIVE POLITICAL CLAIMS AND ACTIVISM?

According to Boyd (2008, p. 112), technologies such as the social media are shaped by the society itself and “reflect society’s values back at us, albeit a bit refracted”. For Nalbantoglu (2014, p. 11), digital activism is more likely to be successful if it occurs both online and offline. In their scrutiny on the social media and the events of the Arab Spring, Wolfsfeld et al. (2013) argue that one cannot understand the role of social media in collective action without first taking into account the political environment in which they operate. They also suggest that a significant increase in the use of the new media is much more likely to follow a significant amount of protest activity than to precede it. At the same time however, internet is claimed to have “changed the traditional conditions of identity production” (Zhao et al. 2008, p. 1817). The anonymous online environment and, more correctly, ‘role-playing’ enable individuals to reinvent themselves through the production of new identities and as such internet becomes an empowering process both for individuals and collectivities (Zhao et al. 2008, p. 1818). This does not necessarily mean that Facebook identities are fake. On the contrary, they have real consequences on the lives of the individuals who construct them (Zhao et al. 2008, p. 1831-1832).

It is also argued that social network sites make the transition from imaginary to action, where people pass from a representational space to a relational and performative one (Mazali 2011, p. 290). For instance, based on her fieldwork which includes interviews with the Chinese diaspora in the United States, Shi (2005, p. 67-68) suggests that active and strategic use of social media for identity negotiation generates an agency of empowerment within a collectivity; although, she also acknowledges that shared cultural identity and mediated communications alone cannot fulfil the task of generating activism. The social media provide nevertheless socialising topics and contexts and create a sense of cultural coherence and unity for the Chinese

diaspora, by symbolically reviving the memories of the past and retelling a certain history, which anchors the identification of the floating diasporic lives (Shi 2005, p. 69). This is important for the sake of social capital, since if this were to decline, a community would experience increased social disorder, reduced participation in civic activities, and potentially more distrust among community members (Ellison et al. 2012, p. 1054).

Greater social capital hence increases inter-personal commitment within a community and the ability to mobilise collective actions while allowing individuals to draw on resources from other members of the networks to which he or she belongs (Ellison et al. 2012, p. 1054). Within this context, social media communication might serve to activate and/or reactivate such networks based on offline-based online relationships, known as ‘anchored’ hence ‘nonymous’, the opposite of ‘anonymous’ relationships (Zhao, 2006). Öze (2017, p. 620) argues that in the nonymous online environment, people do not feel free to establish their identity and real views as they want. This is the case, she suggests of close-knit communities like ‘TRNC’, where people live closer to each other and have frequent face-to-face contacts. Turkish Cypriots who have easy access to technological tools and the internet hence feel under social pressure in social media and their ‘anchored relationships’ pressurise them not to reveal their genuine opinions on social media (Öze, 2016, p. 961). In this case, internet and social media seem to be integrated into the regular patterns of social communication and interaction (Wellman et al. 2002; Kelly 2007).

Foot and Schneider (2006) have already emphasised that social movements are at the same time ‘sociotechnical networks’, composed of both human and technological or material components (2006: 12). This resonates with what Bruno Latour (1992) identified as the ‘missing masses’, the material and technological artefacts that go unnoticed in the scrutiny of human practices. The ‘missing masses’ need to be considered when we try to categorise social interactions into ‘real’ (offline) and ‘virtual’ (online) interactions (Kelley, 2007, p. 10). As Wellman et al. (2002, p. 11) aptly observe for instance, “rather than operating at the expense of the ‘real’ face-to-face world, internet may very well be “an extension, with people using all means of communication to connect with friends and relatives”. Moreover, the internet is not a non-hierarchical space, but is embedded in structural inequalities of the ‘real’ world and the strong privileges of some (existing) media over others (Aouragh, 2012, p. 524). Hence, there are always more advantaged discourses and narratives in the social media, selected, maintained and promoted by more advantaged political and social groups. Cottle and Nolan (2007, p. 657) have

proposed to situate the new/social media practices for instance in relation to the contextual structures of “state power, the role of the military and also the organisation of political opposition in and across the different societies concerned”. According to Cottle (2011, p. 650), this would do more justice to both the political and media complexities that operate in the background of Facebook-generated activism and mobilisation, as ‘real event’ enable ‘real actions’

It is important to note, though, that the constitution of cyber political claims is reinforced by the offline ones as underscored by Wellmann et al. (2002). It is hence essential to avoid the trap that “technological change causes or determines social change” (Wyatt, 2008, p. 168) and in order to do this, it is essential to scrutinise “technology within its social and political contexts” (Davidson, 2013, p. 3). In the light of such conceptual discussion about the impact of social media on political activism, in the following section I shall therefore examine the complex dynamics of Turkish Cypriot identity (trans-)formations since the island’s partitioning in 1974 and the formation of their current self-determination claims. The ways in which such claims are formed and negotiated offer an interesting case study for the literature on whether the social media possess an enabling power in their own right to generate genuine political activism, especially within the context of a *de-facto* state. After-all, as Caspersen (2009, p.59 cited in Kanol, 2017, p. 66) underlines, “*de-facto* states have an agenda of their own which is often contrary to that of the external supporters and the relationship is often fraught with tensions”. Building on this insight, I will then demonstrate the ways in which Facebook has been serving as the virtual platform for Turkish Cypriots’ current political aspirations.

(TRANS-)FORMING IDENTITIES IN NORTHERN CYPRUS

The ethno-territorial conflict which dates back to the decolonization period from the British Empire in the 1950s led to the territorial partitioning of the island in 1974. The Turkish Cypriot leadership declared a *de facto* Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (‘TRNC’) in 1983, on the territory carved out of an internationally recognised Republic of Cyprus (RoC), administered by Greek Cypriots since 1963. Following the 1974 territorial partitioning of the island by the help of the Turkish military and the flight and expulsion of the Greek Cypriots from the northern part of the island, Turkish Cypriots began to construct their much desired imagined state on the newly acquired territory under Turkey’s hegemony (Ker-Lindsay, 2011).

Since they also desired to consolidate their gains and move forward with the new state's economy, they overall did not oppose the agreement between Turkey and the Turkish-Cypriot administration to facilitate the immigration of several thousand people from rural Turkey (Hatay, 2007). What can be described as an initial honeymoon was however followed by negative reactions among the Turkish Cypriots toward the influx of this large number of Turkish settlers (Hatay, 2008). Although this intervention was strongly aspired and celebrated by the Turkish Cypriot community at the time, the romanticism and longing for Turkey have in time left place to resentment which has in time pushed especially left-wing Turkish Cypriots to envision a unified and independent Cyprus together with the Greek Cypriots. However, such narrative was marginalised within the Turkish Cypriot community up until the mid 1990s, since it could not compete with the Turcophile feelings, which rose especially during the 'enclave period' (1963-1974), when Turkish Cypriots lived in self-protected enclaves.

The Turkish Cypriot *de-facto* state however has never been recognised by the international community which supports the RoC's claim of full sovereignty all over the island and regards 'TRNC' as a territory under occupation. However, the RoC has not exercised any authority in the northern part of the island since 1974, mainly due to Turkey's military presence in this entity. Turkey is the only state in the world which recognizes the 'TRNC' and which does not recognize the RoC. It also keeps its air space and ports closed to Greek Cypriot planes and vessels. On the other hand, the 'TRNC' is embargoed by the international community (Ker-Lindsay, 2011). Turkey acts hence as the military and economic patron of northern Cyprus. The Turkish army controls not only the Turkish Cypriot military, but also the Turkish Cypriot police (Akcali, 2009). In return for the economic and military aid it receives, the 'TRNC' has almost always followed Ankara's orders regarding the latter's interests, even when 'TRNC's optimal choice was not consistent with Turkey's (Bahceli, 2004 cited in Kanol, 2015, p. 69). As a result, as Kanol and Köprülü (2017) have demonstrated, reliance on a patron state has led to dynamics of tutelage in northern Cyprus, hindering the quality of its democracy.

Despite decades of negotiations and a normalisation of intercommunity relations, discrepancies exist between Turkish and Greek Cypriot aspirations about a solution acceptable for all. This fact is essential to understand the present Turkish Cypriot political claims, since during the Europeanisation process, "a deep-rooted social transformation took place within the Turkish-Cypriot community" (Sonan 2007, p. 3). As Vural and Rüstemli (2006, p. 344) note, it

was the time when “the historical notion of ‘Turkish community of Cyprus’ [...] started not corresponding to a uniform collective identity”. Turkish Cypriots organized mass demonstrations against the nationalistic Turkish Cypriot leadership, who opposed EU membership. Such mobilisation was boosted by the election victory of the Justice and Development Party’s (AKP) in Turkey in November 2002, under the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who was pro-European at the time. In order to facilitate Turkey’s entry in the EU, Erdoğan changed the traditional Turkish foreign policy on Cyprus and gave full support to the pro-solution political opposition in ‘TRNC’ and the comprehensive peace plan for the resolution of the Cyprus issue, which was released by the UN Secretary General Kofi Annan in 2003, just after AKP’s electoral victory (Loizides and Keskiner, 2004).

The ‘TRNC’ hardliner leadership hence felt obliged in April 2003 to open crossing points on the cease-fire line that since 1974 has divided the two communities in Cyprus. This opening favored the pacific contacts between Greek and Turkish Cypriots and increased the reunification demands of the latter group. Many Turkish Cypriots saw in the reunification an end to their long years of international isolation. They also started to apply for the RoC citizenship, since, despite the partition, they would still have the right to be individual citizens of the RoC and, after the EU accession, of Europe itself. They also started to use the RoC state institution facilities, such as the public health services. Furthermore, a majority of Turkish Cypriots (64%) supported the UN reunification plan – the so-called Annan Plan – that was put into referendum on 24 April 2004 and which was voted down by a strong 76% majority of Greek Cypriots. As a result, the RoC entered the EU alone in May 2004, without the Turkish Cypriots. Since then, the Turkish Cypriot community has started feeling resentful against both the international and Greek Cypriot communities and started voting for the nationalist politicians once again (Akçalı, 2011). The left-wing intellectuals, politicians and youth have continued to resent Turkey’s cultural, militaristic and politico-economic hegemony on the island and maintained their aspirations towards a future based on *Kıbrıslılık* (Cypriotness) (Akçalı, 2009, 2011).

The presence of Turkish settlers on the island since 1974 and a growing number of Turkish migrant workers especially since the 1990s have further exacerbated local hostile feelings towards Turkey. The mainland Turks’ “religiosity, appearance, language – including spoken Turkish or other languages – and other cultural differences” have become “strong boundary-maintaining mechanisms” for Turkish Cypriots (Hatay, 2008, p. 151). It has in fact

been argued that the contact with rural Turks from Turkey has made Turkish Cypriots, perhaps for the first time, aware of their Cypriotness (Güven-Lisaniler and Rodriguez, 2002, p. 184). Interestingly, in most domains of social, political and economic life in northern Cyprus, Turkish settlers do not share the same privileges as Turkish Cypriots do, such as access to civil servants jobs in most departments of the TC administration (Navarro-Yashin 2006, p. 92). Due to the perceived colonization of the island by Turkey and a “fear of political subordination” (Navarro-Yashin, 2006, p. 92), many Turkish Cypriots, particularly those belonging to the middle-class, have started lamenting the presence of settlers and especially poor Turkish workers.¹ They claim that their ‘Cypriot’ culture is in danger. This grievance is also extended to both the Turkish soldiers, whose number is about 30,000, and about 55000 Turkish students.² Since the mid 1990s, discourses such as ‘Cyprus is under occupation’ and ‘All problems of Cyprus started with the intervention of foreign powers, notably Turkey’, once voiced only by a majority of Greek Cypriots, Greeks and the Turkish Cypriot marginalised left-wing, have now also become common discourses among ordinary Turkish Cypriots. A considerable number of Turkish Cypriots lament that “they have been invaded and culturally and physically annihilated” (Yashin-Navarro, 2006, p. 94). It is exactly on these grievances and claims for self-determination as articulated on social media that this article now turns to.

“TURKISH CYPRIOTS ARE BECOMING EXTINCT”

Drawing on my virtual ethnographic work, this section explores the mediated interactions among Turkish Cypriots on the question of self-determination. Virtual ethnography is an adaptive ethnography which sets out to suit itself to the context within which it is enmeshed (Hine, 2000, p. 65). Data presented here refers to three rounds of virtual ethnography. The first was conducted between May and December 2009, following the disillusion of the Turkish Cypriots with the European Union and the new electoral success of the nationalistic parties in ‘TRNC’. It focused on four Facebook pages created on issues of the uniqueness of Cypriot culture and the shrinking and disappearing of the Turkish Cypriot population. A purposive sampling strategy was chosen so to maximise the collection of data which could speak directly to the aim of this study, i.e. how demands of self-determination are formed and negotiated on the web. The second round was conducted between January and May 2013, at a period of deep economic crisis both in Greece and RoC, which also saw Turkey rising as an emerging economic and regional power. During this period, I traced more *a-political* Turkish Cypriot Facebook sites

with a large number of followers. These sites put emphasis not on self-determination claims, but on the uniqueness of the Turkish Cypriot culture such as *Kıbrıs Türkçesi* (Turkish Cypriot Language), *Kıbrıslı Lafcıklar ve Kıbrıs Kültürümüz* (Cypriot dialect and our Cypriot Culture) and *Gıbrıslı Olunmaz, Gıbrıslı Doğulur* (One cannot become a Cypriot, one is born as a Cypriot).

Finally, the third online ethnography was conducted between January and April 2018, in the midst of rising authoritarianism in Turkey and economic turmoil in ‘TRNC’. In this period, facebook sites expressed more nostalgia for the past than self-determination claims. In all rounds, I participated to the online discussions with my genuine Facebook profile and name. I asked questions and examined images. Overall, I analysed 150 Facebook thread discussions, around 50 in each period, paying particular attention to recurrent themes and discursive formations on: Cypriot identity and self-determination claims; criticism towards Turkey, Turkish and Turkish Cypriot politicians; and the distinct Turkish Cypriot culture, language and cuisine. I documented my observations and online interactions as field notes and took screen captures of the various sites and discussions. Materials were then analysed in terms of both content and themes following a coding approach (Elo and Kyngas, 2008).

May/December 2009 - Kıbrıslı Türkler’in Nesli Tükeniyor (Turkish Cypriots are Becoming Extinct)

The most popular and animated of such sites during the May-December 2009 period was named *Kıbrıslı Türkler’in Nesli Tükeniyor* (Turkish Cypriots are Becoming Extinct), with 3,283 members in May 2009, but only 96 in April 2018.³ The profile photo depicted a young girl and a boy sitting on a rock by the seaside, hugging each other and mourning. The basic information section of the site contained both the Turkish and English version of a poem by the Turkish poet Nazim Hikmet, *Bir Hazin Hürriyet* (A Sad State of Freedom) which talks about being ‘free’ and/or ‘liberated’, but only to slave for others and to make the rich richer. The poem further reads “You love your country as the nearest, most precious thing to you. But one day, for example, they may endorse it over to America, and you, too with your great freedom, you have the freedom to become an air-base”. While some members of this site were claiming that they would prefer to live with the Greek Cypriots in the south rather than living with Turks in the

north of Cyprus, many others were making calls to fellow Turkish Cypriots to do something about their pitiful situation.

The site owners and the members were also associating Turkey's hegemony on the island with imperialism. This could enable them to position their resistance against Turkey within an anti-imperialistic and traditional leftist framework, even though most of their remarks about Turks living in Cyprus could easily resonate with the xenophobic far-right. This contradiction, I would argue, is one of the most ambivalent dimensions of the self-determination claims of Turkish Cypriots, which are often embraced and led by 'leftist' political parties in the 'TRNC'. On the one hand, some Turkish Cypriots accuse the Turkish leadership and their pro-Turkey compatriots of being chauvinistic and regressive and identify themselves, qua pro-EU, as peace lovers and progressive. They also consider Greek Cypriots as their brothers and advocate a common life with them. On the other hand, their attitudes and discourses towards immigrant workers from Turkey – often with Arabic (from Hatay) and Kurdish ethnic origins – can easily be defined as racist and xenophobic. Various remarks in a number of posts suggested that these workers were 'smelly' and *cahil* (uneducated) and they 'spoiled' the social scenery in Cyprus. *Gaco*, meaning gypsy, a derogatory term used for Turks living in Cyprus, was also often employed by site members when referring to Turks. A thread on 12-13 May 2009 that generated 475 derogatory wall posts about working class Turks living on the island further indicates the ambivalence of online Turkish Cypriot self-determination claims which often resonated with xenophobic comments.

The thread began with *Deep Blue* writing that the UBP (the National Unity party which campaigned against the Annan Plan and reunification with Greek Cypriots) came to power in the 'TRNC' thanks to the votes of the Turkish settlers and they are therefore *satılmış* – bought with money by Turkey and therefore not real patriots.⁴ A thread answering this post posited that political claims and criticism should not lead to a division between Turkish and Turkish Cypriot because in so doing, the progressive actors in the society lose sight of their real objective. The post owner continued by arguing that Turkish Cypriots should never forget what Turkey has done for Turkish Cypriots and people from the mainland are coming to Cyprus because there is a need for workforce on the island. *Fair Play* responded to this post by insisting that this is still Turkey's fault, because Turkish Cypriots have become second class citizens in Cyprus and this is unacceptable for the local population. *Fair Play* reminded that the 'TRNC's Central Bank is run

by a Turk from Turkey for example, and not by a Turkish Cypriot. As reactions and resentment towards Turkey and condescending remarks about Turks living in Cyprus grew, this site became a stage of passionate debates between Turkish citizens living in Cyprus and the site members and owners. Interestingly, interventions by Turkish citizens in this heated debate were qualified as racist and chauvinistic by the site owners.

KKTC'de Kuran kursu istemiyoruz (We do not want Quranic courses in Cyprus: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/111671170739/>) was another prominent site with over 1,000 members in 2009 which allowed to further explore the Turkish Cypriot demands of self-determination. It was set up in August 2009 by young Turkish Cypriots against the initiatives of the conservative Turkish AKP government to open Quranic courses on the island upon the request of primarily mainland Turks who wanted their children to learn Quran, especially during summer holidays. In 2009, the 'TRNC' government implemented summer religious courses, including Quran lessons (Dayioglu and Hatay, 2016, p. 159). During this time, the AKP government in Turkey had already shifted from its pro-European stance and concentrated more on consolidating its hegemony in Turkey and consequently in northern Cyprus. However, Turkish Cypriots adhere generally to a strict form of secularism and they are not particularly influenced by organised religion (Yesilada, Noordijk, Webster, 2009; Yesilada, 2009). Families who want to send their children to Quranic courses have hence often reported that they had to face strong public criticism, particularly from local teachers (Dayioglu and Hatay, 2016, p. 159). In addition to public reaction, leftist opposition parties, the Cyprus Turkish Teachers' Trade Union (Kıbrıs Türk Öğretmenler Sendikası-KTÖS) and many NGOs led by Alevi associations also opposed the opening of Quranic courses (Dayioglu and Hatay, 2016, p. 159). It is therefore not surprising that most of the threads on this site were almost all the time verbally offensive towards Turks and Turkey. This was for instance the case when a mainland Turk member wrote the following post: "I support the opening of Quranic courses. You, Cypriots need to give some importance to spirituality. You are so used to receiving everything from Turkey and practicing all sorts of immoral acts. Nobody says no to gambling and prostitution on the island". Members who I assumed to be Turkish Cypriots by the way they wrote in Turkish using Cypriot dialect terms started using derogatory terms, accusing that person of being ignorant, coming from an underdeveloped country and various other offensive epithets.

Another very interesting Facebook page was called *Kıbrıs'ta son mücadele* (The last struggle in Cyprus)⁵. Its profile description proclaimed that the site was set up to start a youth movement to say no to extinction and to resist against those who have changed the demographical structure of Cyprus, trying to assimilate the Turkish Cypriots. The choice of the word *mücadele* (struggle) is significant, because it calls for insubordination against the hegemonic power of Turkey, just like most grandfathers of many of this Facebook page's followers had done about fifty years before, against another hegemonic power: the Greek Cypriots. 'Struggle' also hints at territorial self-determination and politico-economic autonomy. This site, however, only had a handful of members and it soon disappeared from Facebook. Finally, *Kıbrıslı Genler Geleceğimiz için* (Turkish Cypriot genes for our future) was another prominent site with several hundred members and it was set up to call Turkish Cypriots to mate only with other Turkish Cypriots in order to continue the Turkish Cypriot breed. There were not lengthy discussions about this subject on the site, but it reflected the widespread tendency among parents in northern Cyprus who prefer their children to marry other Cypriots and stay on the island rather than going away.

January/May 2013- Kıbrıslı Olunmaz, Kıbrıslı Doğulur (One cannot become a Cypriot, one is born as a Cypriot)

If the websites surveyed in 2009 mainly focused on liberation from Turkey and further autonomy, four years later the Facebook scene had almost completely transformed into more mild platforms. Between January-May 2013, in fact, all the previous surveyed websites were no longer active, with the only partial exception of *Kıbrıslı Türkler'in Nesli Tükeniyor*. It is difficult to pin down the exact reason why this happened. Contextual politics obviously matters, as the events from 2009 till 2013, with the frustrated attempts to solve the 'Cypriot question' (Kyrıs, 2014; Ker-Lindsay, 2011) might have convinced the Turkish Cypriots that no support from either the Greek Cypriots or the European Union could have helped them in their self-determination efforts. Second, in 2012-2013, the RoC was still feeling the dire consequences of the 2008 global financial crisis, which spurred anti-European sentiments amongst Greek Cypriots as well. Third, the political left in northern Cyprus was no longer powerful as before, and this most probably alleviated the anti-Turkey and anti-settler rhetoric in 'TRNC'. Thus, during this period, I observed mainly a-political Turkish Cypriot sites which on Facebook attracted large number of followers. These Facebook sites put emphasis not on self-determination claims, but on the

uniqueness of the Turkish Cypriot culture. *Kıbrıs Türkçesi* (Turkish Cypriot Language, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/GIBRIZ/>), which had operated since 2009 with very few members, reached 8,173 members in 2013. Its aim is to revive and continue the Turkish Cypriot dialect, which is quite distinct from the Turkish spoken on the mainland. The site strongly warns its followers not to post anything regarding politics, as this is said to create fragmentation and heated arguments among the members. *Kıbrıslı Lafcıklar ve Kıbrıs Kültürümüz*– (Cypriot dialect and our Cypriot Culture, https://www.facebook.com/_KIBRISLI-LAFCIKLAR-VE-KIBRIS-KULTURUMUZ_-110051819018688/), with 16,722 followers, and *Gıbrıslı Olunmaz, Gıbrıslı Doğulur* (One cannot become a Cypriot, one is born as a Cypriot, <https://www.facebook.com/Kıbrıslı-Olunmaz-Gıbrıslı-Doğulur-108980365829880/>), with 1,008 members, are all similar sites, set up to revive love for the country and culture, but they strictly avoid any claims about self-determination and separateness from Turkey.

Some other sites focused on emphasising a distinct Turkish Cypriot character. Some of these groups, which are still active, are *Gerçek Kıbrıslılar* (Real Cypriots) with 10,217 members, *Has Kıbrıslılar* (Original Cypriots), with 801 members, *Ben Kıbrıslıyım* (I'm a Cypriot), with 729 members, and *Son Kıbrıslılar* (The Last Cypriots), with 174 members. Strongholds of micro-nationalism, especially vis-à-vis the mainland Turks living on the island, these groups mainly share comments about folk, the local Cypriot dialect, traditions and consumption materials, such as food and drinks that emphasise being Turkish Cypriot. In this sense, these websites have moved from a hot form of nationalism, as witnessed in the previous years, to a more subtle, banal form of nationalism (Billig, 1995), which is no less powerful in conveying the message of a distinct Turkish Cypriot identity.

April 2018- Real Cypriots and Gatriyaba

As a participant observer, I was 'deported' from the *Real Cypriots* site in April 2018 without any prior notice, most probably because my Facebook profile depicted my birthplace as Adana, a city in Turkey. For *Real Cypriots*, one could not be a half-Turkish Cypriot like myself or a naturalised Cypriot, apparently. I've also found out several other Facebook groups aimed at reviving the Turkish Cypriot cities and villages left in the Greek Cypriot side especially in the Paphos area, such as *Poli ve Köylerinin sesi* (Voice of Poli and its villagers), *Ben Baflıyım* (I'm from Paphos), *Yalya Nostalji* (Yialia Nostalgia), *Arodezliler* (Those from Arodez). These groups mainly shared comments about photos from the past, neighbours, relatives, and the local cuisine

from that area. This fairly recent Facebook activism is reminiscent of the Palestinians' occupation of corners of cyberspace to retell and remind insights into the experiences of their own extended families, or clans and of their particular villages of origin, as scrutinised by Stamatopoulou-Robbins (2005). Just like in Palestine Remembered website (www.palestineremembered.com), rather than acting as a new terrain of struggle and creating a virtual homeland online, it seems that these recent Turkish Cypriot Facebook sites reflect a "widespread desire as much for freedom to reconnect with specific people and pasts as to attain some sort of self-determination" (Stamatopoulou-Robbins, 2005, p.33).

Gatriyaba (Elder Sister Gatriye, <https://www.facebook.com/www.gatrish.net/>) is perhaps the most popular current Facebook site, which connects claims of self-determination from Turkey with a celebration of the uniqueness of the Turkish Cypriot culture and language. The site has 32,671 followers and it takes its name from an elderly, but politically active, witty and strong-willed Turkish Cypriot female character, created by the anarchist Turkish Cypriot writer and bar owner, Mahmut Anayasa. The character *Gatriyaba* or shortly *Gatrish* is a rebel who only speaks in the Turkish Cypriot dialect, which Anayasa claims is about to be forgotten and dismissed by the dominant mainland culture, and criticises especially pro-Turkey Turkish Cypriot politicians, Turkey's leaders, but also the Turkish Cypriot society itself. The creator and the owner of the site, Mahmut Anayasa, argues that *Gatrish* will continue to produce, write and postulate that "the king is naked", meaning that she will continue to bring into the light the complexities, hypocrisies, paradoxes that exist within the Turkish Cypriot society and politics vis-à-vis Turkey, as well as maintain the distinctiveness of the Turkish Cypriot culture from the mainland. *Gatrish*, for instance, criticizes the Turkish Cypriot society for its pettiness and greed and how such conformism hinders the community from claiming complete independence from Turkey.

Next to these current Facebook sites, some other new sites have been opened since June 2017, which aim to bring the Greek and Turkish Cypriot communities together. In June 2017, the Greek and Turkish Cypriot leaders re-opened negotiations in Switzerland, aimed once again at reuniting the island after more than 40 years of division, in what some activists said could be the last chance of a settlement. During this time, some more Facebook groups were formed in support of the peace process, such as *United Cyprus Now*, *United Cyprus Republic*, *Cyprus without borders*, *My motherland is Cyprus*, *Neither Turkey nor Greece*, in order to give social

media support to the on-going negotiations. As the peace negotiations are currently blocked, these new sites stay in a dormant state at the moment, to be reactivated most probably when the negotiations open again.

UNDERSTANDING FACEBOOK ACTIVISM FOR SELF-DETERMINATION

In international politics, the principle of self-determination is embodied in Article I of the UN Charter, which states the principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples should be respected. It is hence a democratic value that UN upholds. However, there is not a clear definition of what self-determination exactly means today. Who has for instance a right to self-determination? Is it an ethnic group, an heterogeneous people, a nation? Is self-determination about autonomy or statehood? According to the choice approach, self-determination through secession simply represents an extension of liberal democratic rights (Tocci, 2003, p. 72). The just cause theory further suggests that a right to secession exists when a particular minority has been treated unjustly by the state to which it currently belongs (Tocci, 2003, p. 73). In its independence declaration in 1983, the ‘TRNC’ assembly indicated that “the exercise of the right of self-determination has become an imperative for the Turkish Cypriot people” (Blay, 1987, p. 97). Although the choice and the just cause theory approaches explain Turkish Cypriot self-determination claims vis-à-vis the Republic of Cyprus at the time, they fall short of explaining the current Turkish Cypriot self-determination claims. Social identity theory, on the other hand observes that self-determination happens when individuals identify with a group on the basis of two fundamental motives: a) subjective uncertainty reduction; and b) enhancement of self-esteem (Abrams & Hogg, 1988; Hornsey & Hogg, 2000 cited in Psaltis and Cakal, 2016). Such motives may in fact be the most genuine reasons why Turkish Cypriots have started exploiting Facebook for self-determination claims. In other words, self-determination in the Turkish Cypriot context may not necessarily indicate a far-reaching autonomy in the traditional political sense and/or statehood claims. There are other important elaborations that need to be discussed here.

As observed by Öze (2017), it is clear that Turkish Cypriots have been pressurized by their offline identities in their ambivalence towards self-determination from Turkey. This can clearly be observed during the 2009 period, when radical discourses such as extreme self-determination claims and calling people to struggle against Turkey and/or derogatory terms about mainland Turks and Turkey had gradually faded away because of not finding open public

support at a large scale. Such strong claims seemed to be hindered by social pressure, but also by the strong presence of several layers of social identity among Turkish Cypriots, e.g., supranational, national, religious, and ethnic layers. While many of them are very much attached to their Cypriotness, Turkishness also remains an important factor for a significant number of them (Akçalı, 2011, 2009). There are strong family links between Turkish Cypriots and mainland Turks, especially due a high number of inter-marriages and hybrid children (Akçalı, 2007).

Online interactions hence do not necessarily remove people from their offline world. They do not most probably create new identities and fresh beginnings either. They may, on the contrary, be used to support the already existing relationships and help keep people in contact, even when life transformations move them away from each other (Ellison et al., 2012, p.1165). Social boundaries also affect what people share on social media in northern Cyprus as well. Turkish Cypriots accept invisible offline group norms, identities and bound themselves in social media (Öze, 2017, p. 623). As such, they might not be willing to be too open about their ideological and political affiliations in the social media, although I have noted above that some were quite open about their xenophobia. Öze's research also reveals that Turkish Cypriots do not interact as individuals, but as members of their social group standings. Their offline relationships (anchored relationships) affect their disclosure levels on Facebook. However, one should say that disclosure levels of respondents on Facebook about sensitive issues are usually low (Öze, 2017, p. 623). Rather than sharing their views, people frequently use Facebook to observe others, as they are aware of the reactions that they will face after sharing posts (Öze, 2017, p. 623). This offers some indications about why cyber claims may in reality be formed and negotiated in the same manner as the offline ones, although it is true that the social media provides a more pre-arranged and controlled public platform for these claims to be voiced.

It is true at the same time that there are stark differences between native Cypriots' and mainland Turks' aspirations regarding 'TRNC', and this needs to be underlined. Hatay and Charalambous (2015) have already shown that the post-Annan Turkish Cypriot generation is in favour of a federal solution and reconciliation more than their grandparents and Greek Cypriots. A similar finding also emerges in a more recent study by Özgür et al. (2017), who have surveyed the political attitudes of more than 300 students in northern Cyprus, as well as their identities and preferences for the future of the island. The results depict that the Turkish Cypriot students, contrary to students from Turkey and from other countries living in Cyprus, are more supportive

of a decentralized federative structure, are more likely to identify themselves with both Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot identities and are more willing to embrace a consociational approach to the Cyprus Question. The Turkish Cypriot students also see fewer differences between the Turkish and Greek Cypriot communities than students from Turkey or other countries do (Özgür et al. 2017). These views confirm what I have observed in the analysis of the Facebook websites, namely that the autonomy and self-determination claims are real and burgeoning within the Turkish Cypriot community and they are being expressed via various channels.

Facebook has hence worked as one of these channels and it is interesting to observe how in time, it has moved from a platform where Turkish Cypriots' self-determination claims were formulated in an antagonising tone to one where a sense of Cypriotness has been formulated in softer tones, merely aiming at celebrating its distinct culture and insular identity without creating a hostile environment excluding Turkish identity. As Reyhanoglu and Cengiz (2018) have observed, shared comments and discourses that construct being a Cypriot every time a Cypriot accent is used have contributed to the re-enactment of the Cypriot identity in the virtual world (2018). The shift from more radical Facebook groups on self-determination claims that operated in 2009 towards the most recent Facebook sites emphasising the cultural traits and distinctiveness of Turkish Cypriots indicates a specific agency and the ability of such agency to create a moderate ground. After-all, the social media as a discursive mechanism engages predominantly with people's political and cultural claims as a form of reinforcement, and only the successful political discourses (in the Cypriot case, the aspirations to protect the distinct Turkish Cypriot characteristic) attain the constitutive force among the many other discourses that are continually produced. The fact that only certain discourses become successful among the others may also be because the social media provides a less passionate, pre-arranged and controlled public sphere for socio-political claims. The new and rather 'moderate' discourse that has emerged in the Turkish Cypriot case via Facebook may very well be a form of self-determination as well, a self-determination claim which fits better into the current Turkish Cypriot reality.

CONCLUSION

This article has tried to shed light on the emergence and the dissemination of Turkish Cypriots' self-determination claims on Facebook and their re-enaction in terms of a uniquely Cypriot memory and identity. It aimed to scrutinise this burgeoning phenomenon and to

understand whether such virtual discursive practices of self-determination bring a novelty to the ways in which a rather complex and ambivalent case of self-determination claim is negotiated. The paper also tried to find out whether online actions differ from traditional practices and performances of self-determination and whether Facebook is an innovative social sphere for the politics of self-determination or the cyber claims are in reality formed and negotiated in the same manner as the offline ones.

This study found that Turkish Cypriots' Facebook activism may very well be for strengthening their community, shielding their distinct characteristics from mainland Turkey and raising their self-esteem, rather than indicating demands for complete autonomy in the traditional political sense of the word and/or statehood. Plus, there is a strong indication that Turkish Cypriots are pressurised by their offline identities within their 'real' social world in their ambivalence for self-determination claims from Turkey and this proves the strong influence and impact of offline identities on online ones and claims.

During the 2009 period, when I observed Turkish Cypriots' Facebook activisms, radical discourses such as extreme self-determination claims and calling people to struggle against Turkey and/or derogatory terms about mainland Turks and Turkey in time gradually faded away, most probably because of not finding open public support at a large scale. This may be mainly because the 'real' Turkish Cypriot politico-social space is strongly influenced by familial, intercultural, socio-political and socio-economic links with Turkey and mainland Turkey. Strong demands for political autonomy and perhaps a possible independent statehood are hence not only hindered by social pressure, but also by supranational, national, religious, and ethnic layers being parts of the Turkish Cypriot identity. It is very rare hence that online interactions remove people from their offline world. They do not most probably create new identities and fresh beginnings, either. They may on the contrary be used to support the already existing relationships and help keep people in contact, even when life transformations move them away from each other (Ellison et al., 2012, p.1165). Social boundaries also affect what people share on social media in northern Cyprus. Turkish Cypriots accept invisible offline group norms, identities and bound themselves to the norms when they are active in social media (Oze, 2017, p. 623). As such, they might not be willing to be too open about their ideological and political affiliations in the social media, not to hurt their 'real' socio-political environment. These are some of the indications why cyber claims may in reality be formed and negotiated in the same manner as the offline ones.

Such indications respond to the initial question asked at the beginning of this article, as well: whether the social media possess an enabling power in their own right to generate genuine political activism. Although this article's findings tend to respond unfavourably to this question, they also suggest that rather than acting as a passive discursive medium, Facebook's hosting of Turkish Cypriots' self-determination claims has had an agency on its own and enabled a more moderate ground where Turkish Cypriots could express their wish to retain and protect their distinct culture and insular identity without creating a hostile environment or antagonising and/or excluding their Turkish identity. The shift from more radical Facebook groups on self-determination claims that operated in 2009 towards the most recent Facebook sites emphasising rather the cultural traits and distinctiveness of Cypriots indicates such agency and its ability to create a moderate ground. Hence, rather than acting as a new terrain of struggle for self-determination for politico-economic autonomy and statehood, Facebook, with respect to the symbolic and virtual constructions of Cypriotness, may have acted as a mere medium to express a "widespread desire" (Stamatopoulou Robbins, 2005) to guard distinctiveness, increase self-esteem, shield the community characteristics, feed nostalgia, and reconnect with the kin and past. Such desire may very well be a form self-determination that depicts more clearly the current Turkish Cypriot *de-facto* reality.

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¹Both the Turkish-Cypriot opposition and the Greek-Cypriot political forces have been claiming that the demographical structure of the island has changed because of the increasing amount of Turkish settlers, who are also said to condition the outcomes of the general elections. These fears are partly justified since the Turkish settlers constitute about 25-30 per cent of the total population of the voters in the 'TRNC' (Hatay, 2005).

² Data released by the Minister of Culture and Education of 'TRNC' Cemal Ozyigit on November 4, 2018, available in Turkish Cypriot daily *Gundem Kibris* <https://www.gundemkibris.com/kibris/kktc-de-universite-ogrencisi-sayisi-ne-kadar-h263444.html> (last accessed on 28 May, 2019).

³ Since January 2019, this Facebook site is no longer in use .

⁴ Contrary to popular beliefs that Turkish settlers support nationalist Turkish Cypriot parties, evidence from general elections suggests that their electoral behavior actually follows the vote of the native Turkish Cypriot population (Hatay, 2005; Akçalı, 2007).

⁵ This Facebook site is no longer in use.