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Critical Junctures and Ontological Security in Unrecognized States: The Response of Northern Cyprus to the COVID-19 Pandemic

Enver Gülseven 

Department of International Relations, Faculty of Political Science, Girne American University, Northern Cyprus
Email: envergulseven@hotmail.com, envergulseven@gau.edu.tr

Abstract

This article will examine the response of the self-declared Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) to the COVID-19 pandemic from an ontological security approach to illustrate how critical junctures may help de facto states in their quest for status and internal legitimacy. Stressing the pandemic's role in the reconstruction of political narratives and self-legitimizing practices among Turkish Cypriot elites, it sheds light on the effects of this global crisis on domestic power struggles in Northern Cyprus as well as its quasi-foreign relations with its patron state (Turkey), parent state (Republic of Cyprus), and the European Union. The study shows that both nationalist and federalist elites of the de facto entity instrumentalized the pandemic in their legitimation strategies and engaged in opportunistic behavior amid the outbreak. It also reveals how the pandemic enhanced the ontological security of Northern Cyprus while advancing its nationalist leadership's claims for legitimate authority by enabling state-specific forms of agency and unilateral acts concerning the Cyprus dispute that may jeopardize the resumption of peace talks with Greek Cypriots. Thus, it can be assumed that advanced ontological security of the TRNC is highly volatile given the prospects of further isolation and de-engagement in the post-pandemic era.

Keywords: ontological security; unrecognized states; nationalism; COVID-19 pandemic; Turkish Cypriots

Introduction

The global COVID-19 outbreak constitutes a critical juncture with respect to the legitimacy of states as well as political actors involved in the management of the pandemic. While failures or draconian measures may trigger a legitimacy crisis, successful handling of the outbreak can consolidate the legitimate authority of states as well as their leaders. As viruses and diseases do not respect borders, nor do they distinguish between sovereign states and contested territories, this includes de facto states like the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC). Such entities possess control over their claimed area and carry out normal functions of statehood, but they are denied international legitimacy since they often result from an unresolved violent conflict. Despite its lack of recognition, Northern Cyprus achieved a relatively strong degree of internal legitimacy through various sources, such as physical security, service delivery, economic goods, democratization,¹ and a sense of ontological security, which enabled Turkish Cypriots (TCs) to sustain their distinct identity vis-à-vis Greek Cypriots (GCs) after a turbulent period following Cyprus's 1960 independence. Having said that, the unrecognized entity still faces a series of legitimacy challenges, especially in recent decades, because of a number of factors, including mal-governance; economic setbacks; asymmetric relations with its patron state, Turkey, and its parent state, the Republic of Cyprus (RoC); and

identity contestations among nationalists and federalists that undermine the ontological security of its citizens.

Even if it is hard to foresee the precise effects of the enduring pandemic, the rising trend of nationalism in many countries is expected to be reinforced by the crisis considering the failure of meaningful global cooperation, closure of borders, growing xenophobic and racist biases, and rising importance of citizenship (see Bieber 2020b; Woods et al. 2020). Although the opposite argument can also be made, given the global scale of the outbreak and the greater need for international cooperation, the immediate policies worldwide confirmed that nationalism emerged as a key variable shaping the responses of many states to the COVID-19 pandemic. This is particularly the case in divided, postconflict societies that have suffered from recent civil wars and armed conflicts.

In this context, an unsurprising consequence of the health crisis in such settings could be the consolidation of actors and identities that advocate for ethnic nationalism and secession, especially in de facto states like Northern Cyprus, considering its relatively successful response to the first wave of the COVID-19 outbreak. Indeed, the last TC patient was discharged two months after the contested territory reported its very first case. Much has been made in the Turkish and TC media of the TRNC's successful response to the pandemic, while members of parliament (MPs) from the governing nationalist party declared that the unrecognized state had performed better than the world's great powers by highlighting its relatively low mortality rate, which stands at 0.04 percent (*Kıbrıs Genç TV*, "Savaşan: "0.04 ölüm oranı ile KKTC dünya devi ülkelerden daha başarılı," February 15, 2022). Some commentators even claimed that the isolation of the region turned out to be an unforeseen advantage in the struggle against the coronavirus (Kazancı 2020). The fact that the pandemic hit Northern Cyprus amid the chaos of presidential elections also forced the authorities to respond to public demands for an early lockdown and accompanying measures.

Obviously, this success could not have materialized without the support of external actors, most notably Turkey, given the TRNC's poor health infrastructure and limited relations with the outside world. This reinforced the rhetoric that only Turkey can protect and save TCs in times of emergency, which, in turn, helps justify a recent shift in the Turkish side's² preference from federalism toward a two-state solution to the Cyprus dispute. However, the pandemic also exposed the entity's vulnerabilities and dependence while opening space for greater interference of Ankara. Hence, the nationalist government faces stiff competition from the opposition parties and other federalist actors, who often question the capacity of the TRNC for real statehood. Considering the presence of actors that seek to delegitimize the entity from within or outside and the fact that legitimacy can also be attained by such internal and external actors, the COVID-19 pandemic represents a milestone for the TC leadership and its ability to command legitimate political authority.

In this regard, the present article investigates the role of the pandemic in the reconstruction of legitimation practices and narratives of various TC actors from an ontological security approach. Some recent studies (Goode, Stroup, and Gaufman 2020; Gülseven 2020; Kirke 2020) have been published on the connections between the coronavirus crisis, nationalism, and ontological security, highlighting the instrumentalization of the pandemic by nationalist leaders and media in legitimizing anti-globalist policies and reasserting national belonging. Nevertheless, there has been little discussion of the unanticipated opportunities that the crisis brings for political elites of unrecognized states in the provision of ontological security and legitimization of statehood. In fact, the study of unrecognized states has only gained prominence in the discipline of international relations in recent decades. This attention has been driven not only by the rising number of secessionist territories and the strong resilience of some de facto states, but also by the growing recognition that the international system is far more variegated than is usually imagined (Pegg 2017). Therefore, exploring the internal political dynamics of de facto states as well as their interactions with external actors is becoming increasingly important.

With this in mind, this study looks at the potential impact of the pandemic on the domestic power struggles and quasi-foreign relations of one of the most resilient unrecognized states in the world from an ontological security perspective. In particular, it asks: How does the COVID-19 outbreak facilitate the enhancement of the ontological security of Northern Cyprus and its nationalist elites, which, in turn, reinforces their claims for legitimate authority and separate statehood? Apparently, the drive for ontological security cannot provide an explanation for every aspect of the TRNC's response to the pandemic. However, a society's need for a secure identity is greater under conditions of ultimate uncertainty, and the pandemic provides political elites with numerous legitimization strategies and narratives to utilize. This study is thus a preliminary attempt to reveal the instrumental effects of critical junctures, like COVID-19, for political elites' identities and quest for legitimacy in unrecognized states that already face existing ontological insecurities because of their undecided future status.

Indeed, the historical and geopolitical context of the Eastern Mediterranean and the Balkans, which are home to various communities still recovering from the traumatic experience of ethnic conflicts at the crossroads of Europe, Africa, and the Middle East, ensures that the concept of national identity sustains a fundamental place in regional politics. Given that critical junctures may bring various identity challenges, especially in postconflict societies, ontological security remains as a key factor that can facilitate or complicate resolution processes in the region's protracted international conflicts, including Cyprus, Israel/Palestine, and Kosovo, as well as domestic ones, such as Turkey's Kurdish issue. Hence, the response of Northern Cyprus to the pandemic serves as a representative case study that can provide valuable insight into the struggles of postconflict societies and unrecognized states in times of global crises, as well as the importance of identity and ontological security for conflict resolution or management processes in the wider region. The article also aims to contribute to the growing ontological security literature, which should be linked more precisely to debates concerning legitimacy and unrecognized statehood by highlighting opportunities brought by the COVID-19 pandemic for *de facto* states in their claim to be the main ontological security provider for their citizens.

The article is divided into five sections. The following section reviews the literature on ontological security to present a theoretical framework for the analysis. It defines the concept and its importance in understanding legitimacy as well as the impact of critical junctures on legitimization practices and narratives especially in postconflict settings. The third section provides historical background on the processes of state and identity building in the TC community and then illustrates how certain events of the previous decades weakened the ontological security of the TRNC and its nationalist elites. The next section demonstrates the instrumentalization of the COVID-19 pandemic by various groups in Northern Cyprus. Particular attention is paid to how nationalist elites attempted to explain the *raison d'être* of the TRNC and restore its ontological security through various legitimization practices and nationalist narratives. The conclusions of the research are drawn in the last section.

Ontological Security, Critical Junctures, and Internal Legitimacy in Unrecognized States

Discourse on the relationship between states, legitimacy, and ontological security has mostly relied on the studies of Anthony Giddens (1990, 92), who described the concept as "the confidence that most human beings have in the continuity of their self-identity and in the constancy of the surrounding social and material environments of action." Giddens suggested that ontological security is a basic need for all human beings regardless of class, religion, or ethnic background. It is sustained through routines and stable relationships with significant others that enable actors to uphold cognitive control of their environment, keep up with everyday activities, and possess a sense of meaningful agency. This psycho-sociological concept was adopted by some scholars in the discipline of international relations (see Kinnvall 2004; Mitzen 2006; Steele 2005, 2008) who claimed that states also seek to maintain ontological security and act as the main ontological

security providers for their citizens. Accordingly, they behave in ways that sustain a stable and distinct sense of self-conception, even if this sometimes endangers their physical security, which is often understood as the physical survival of a state's citizens and the maintenance of its governing system or its territorial integrity.

Indeed, ontological and physical security constitute two distinct but interrelated layers of security. While conflicts may threaten the physical security of an entity/society, they may simultaneously constitute a source of its ontological security as they help deal with certain existential questions (Mitzen 2006). Alternatively, an entity can be in a state of physical security while being in a state of ontological insecurity. Although physical security is very important for *de facto* states, considering that most of them came into existence following violent conflicts, ontological security is also essential. In most cases, physical security is already provided by a strong patron state. Yet, unless the removal of physical security concerns is accompanied by the reconstruction of identity distinctions that sustain and/or reestablish the stability and endurance of being, postconflict societies may feel ontologically insecure (Rumelili 2013, 15). In the long term, failure to meet the ontological needs of its citizens and insecurity in its self-conception can undermine an unrecognized state's internal legitimacy and jeopardize its very existence.

Since *de facto* states are mostly isolated, they seek both protection and de-isolation in their relations with patron states, which they rely on to make their voices heard in the international arena. Such entities have no direct economic and diplomatic relations with the outside world and often face restrictions on other means of communication, such as flight bans and exclusion from sports and cultural events. Therefore, they can operate internationally only through their patron state. This not only necessitates harmonization of their quasi-foreign policies with the patron, but also results in the latter's excessive meddling or interference in *de facto* states' internal affairs as well as its disproportionate cultural influence. Hence, maintaining distinct self and ontological security in *de facto* states is actually harder to accomplish. Put differently, interconnection between domestic and quasi-foreign policies eliminates the boundary between the inside and outside of unrecognized states and makes their identity less resilient when faced with external challenges, and thus it is more significant for their internal legitimacy and sustainability (Jakša 2017, 41).

In view of their legitimizing power, *de facto* states seek to obtain stable self-conceptions that are often constructed and secured by certain political narratives. From an ontological security perspective, narratives are sense-making apparatuses that allow notions of stable selfhood to be projected and sustained across time and space (see Kinnvall 2004; Mälksoo 2015; Steele 2008). Self-conceptions of unrecognized states, which are established in the wake of a military operation by their patron, are often constructed through nationalist narratives. As Bieber (2020a, 10) mentioned, nationalism values membership in a nation more highly than other identities and is built on the designation and exclusion of others. Accordingly, nationalist narratives usually depict territories as "our" homes and a source of association for "us" versus the "other," while contrasting friend and enemy to nourish the idea of a siege mentality³ (see Goode, Stroup, and Gaufman 2020; Kadman 2015). In *de facto* states, such narratives particularly stress identity-based differences from those living in the parent state, negative experiences of coexistence, and the right to self-determination. They can be quite effective in convincing the populace of the entity to ascribe significance to certain events that can be utilized later in various contexts. Therefore, unrecognized states tend to define themselves more in relation to their parent states, which are imagined as the main "other" and are more likely to turn toward nationalism to sustain ontological security.

However, such self-conceptions are often challenged and contested by nondominant groups in *de facto* states that construct alternative identities to ethnic nationalism and may find support from external actors. Occasionally, such challengers can weaken the ability of an unrecognized state to provide ontological security for its citizens even if they do not lack material power. Since the provision of a shared ontological structure constitutes an important prop backing legitimacy, institutions of political authorities that do not provide the populace with a secure ontological framework cannot be regarded as truly sovereign, even if they have exclusive territorial control. For

de facto states, this function is even more critical given that they are operating in contested territories that are also claimed by the internationally recognized parent state. Moreover, they face competition from other institutions such as civil society organizations and external actors in fulfilling ontological security needs of their citizens.⁴ In other words, unrecognized states' role as the main ontological security provider is always confronted by internal and external challengers. Ultimately, postconflict settings are characterized by overlapping claims to sovereignty and authority, profound societal divisions, rapidly shifting contextual factors, and multiple legitimacy audiences (see Billerbeck and Gippeck 2017; Coleman 2017; Dagher 2018; Whalan 2017).

In addition to narratives, states obtain ontological security by routinizing relationships with significant others and eventually become attached to those relationships (Mitzen 2006, 341). Accordingly, a state's entitlement to be the main ontological security provider for its citizens obliges a quest for stable relationships within the international system. For de facto states, however, such stable relationships are rather difficult to achieve since they have limited contact with the outside world and their interactions with the patron and parent states are characterized by contradictions and ambiguities. This stems from the former's essential economic and military assistance, which opens the door for interference in de facto states' domestic affairs as well as the latter's counter-recognition tactics, which often reinforce its dependence on the patron. Put differently, unrecognized states face an ontological dilemma regarding their relations with significant others. As Jakša (2017, 38) pointed out, "what do they gain if they wrest the territory from the parent state but lose their independence to their patron, if they gain security, but lose their identity in the process."

Indeed, ontological security can be seriously damaged by the political process of identity debates and contestations, which are frequently triggered by critical junctures (Steele 2005, 17). Giddens (1984, 61) described critical junctures as unforeseen self-identity threats that impact considerable numbers of people in a society and disrupt predominant narratives and established routines. Ejodus (2017, 884) emphasized how states become ontologically insecure during critical junctures, which allow actors to take advantage of the situation and challenge the legitimacy of governing elites. To respond, regimes are obliged to create novel narratives to reinforce social cohesion and prove that they are able to control the situation so that they no longer endanger their identity (Steele 2005). As de facto states are constantly engaged in peace talks with their parent states, the negotiation process can generate a series of critical junctures. In particular, plans proposed during the negotiations may bring serious challenges to the sense of self, identity, and established routines by repetitively raising uncertainties in regard to the future status of de facto states and, in turn, prevent the citizens of such entities from becoming ontologically secure.

For instance, several authors have argued that the 2004 United Nations (UN) reunification plan for Cyprus⁵ triggered ontological insecurity and peace anxieties because it presumed a collective Cypriot identity and blurred the differences that constitute the distinct identities of the island's two main communities. Indeed, Rumelili (2013) explained the consecutive failures of peace plans in Cyprus with the conflicting parties' pursuit of ontological security by means of securitizing remaining differences. Loizides (2015) also emphasized peace anxieties during the Annan Plan period and claimed that the referendum campaign made GCs rethink the importance of the RoC, while Dağlı (2016) emphasized how a Cypriotist narrative based on sameness made the community ontologically insecure by adding Turkishness to Cypriot identity. Even though both sides encountered identity challenges during the process, the burden was heavier for the GC community as the internationally recognized and ontologically securer side of the conflict.

Health crises like the COVID-19 pandemic constitute another type of critical juncture for all societies since they pose extraordinary challenges to our sense of self, daily routines, trust mechanisms, and freedoms that allow people to be ontologically secure. As far as de facto states are concerned, a pandemic can be particularly destructive in terms of ontological security, given that the crisis reveals their susceptibilities and dependence on external actors. It is also a reminder that they can be excluded from the global fight against health crises and neglected anew by the

international community. Nonetheless, the COVID-19 pandemic has also generated opportunities for political elites in de facto states to tackle ontological security challenges through various narratives and practices. Indeed, critical junctures are moments in which implementing institutional change, transforming certain policies, or constructing new narratives becomes a greater possibility (Bieber 2020b). In particular, narratives that depict and propose societies as unified against the virus are effective at reinforcing the societal morale, shared bonds, and confidence mechanisms that are critical to maintain ontological security in such grim periods (Kirke 2020). Besides, successful handling of a health crisis can become a source of pride, especially in an unrecognized entity that faces international isolation.

Hence, practices that exhibit capability in managing the crisis or securing greater engagement with the outside world can help legitimize a de facto state while strengthening its ontological security. Moreover, if efforts of engagement elicit constructive responses from external actors, this can upgrade the status of the unrecognized entity in international settings as well as in the eyes of its own citizens. Even uncooperative or unsatisfactory responses can be utilized in elites' legitimation strategies since they often secure the "savior and protector" identity of the patron state while reinforcing secessionist tendencies and ethnic nationalism. Indeed, de facto states are particularly prone to an upsurge in nationalist sentiments during critical junctures such as a pandemic given that they exist under permanent conditions of insecurity, fear, and siege mentality because of unrecognition, isolation, and fresh memories of turbulent past and traumas. To understand how pandemic nationalism and/or international engagement can enhance the ontological security of the TRNC, one has to explore the roots of TCs' existing ontological insecurities and legitimacy challenges faced by their unrecognized state.

The Roots of Turkish Cypriots' Ontological Insecurities

The Constitution of the TRNC defines TCs as an "integral and inseparable part of the Turkish nation" while identifying Turkey as the "motherland."⁶ As such, the community members share entrenched ontological insecurities of the larger nation that were generated by Turkey's geopolitical and cultural in-betweenness and its imperfect modernization since the 19th century (Çapan and Zarakol 2019). Like mainlanders, TCs lacked ethnic consciousness and identified themselves as Muslim under the *millet* system⁷ until the birth of nationalism in the late Ottoman period. Accordingly, Cyprus's two communities were institutionalized as distinct *cemaats*,⁸ and religion became the central constituent of their identities (Vural and Rüstemli 2006).

When the British obtained the administration of the island from the Ottomans in 1878, a *millet*-like communal separation of the system was maintained and augmented as part of the "divide and rule" policy. As mentioned by Mylonas (2019), preservation of specific Ottoman-era policies in former Ottoman lands was largely a strategic choice of new rulers to serve new purposes, described as "manufactured legacy." Despite the maintenance of what Tsitselikis has called the "neo-*millet*" system (cited in Mylonas 2019, 870), TCs lost their legal privileges while experiencing hardship and humiliation during the colonial period since they found themselves a vulnerable demographic minority on the island (Yılmaz 2008). As a response to physical and ontological insecurities prompted by British colonial policies and rising Greek nationalism in Cyprus, TC elites promoted Kemalist nationalism among members of their community, in line with the republican reforms of Turkey during the 1920s and 1930s. Kemalism, which constructed a "Western, secular and self-confident Turkish identity," was seen as a tool for modernization and resistance, and it was adopted by many TCs earlier than most Turkish mainlanders (Bryant 2004, 233). Certain initiatives of the colonial government also facilitated the shift from a religious to a national identity as nationalism replaced religion as the most effective tool for exacerbating divisions in Cyprus (see Xypolia 2017; Fics 2018).

The post-World War II period witnessed the peak of Turkish nationalism on the island, which was translated into "Turkification" and the preference for *taksim*, in opposition to GC demands for

enosis during the decolonization of Cyprus.⁹ Nevertheless, the newly established UN offered the creation of an independent republic in Cyprus as a middle ground between the conflicting preferences of the island's two main communities. In other words, the road to Cyprus's independence in 1960 came as an undesired compromise and was far from unambiguous. Nation building did not take root and bicomunal tension emerged from the very beginning (see Markides 1977). Eventually the consociational power-sharing system, in which *millet*-like features persisted, failed to provide physical or ontological security to Cypriot communities and collapsed in the wake of a constitutional crisis in 1963. This was followed by intercommunal violence, displacement, and withdrawal of TC representation from the institutions of the republic.¹⁰

Until the military intervention of Turkey in response to the Greek-backed coup attempt against President Makarios in 1974, TCs, who gathered in enclaves scattered all over Cyprus, were governed by a joint civilian-military organization led by nationalist front-runner Rauf Denktaş. This organization, which was subsequently named the Provisional Administration, successfully instrumentalized nationalism and acted as the main ontological security provider for most TCs during this turbulent period. In the collective memory of TCs, the enclave period stands for the major shared trauma, which provided Turkish nationalists with a great opportunity to build a separate system of administration that would eventually justify the ethnically based territorial division of the island.

The post-1974 nationalist sentiment and the concentration of TCs in the northern part of Cyprus resulted in the declaration of the Turkish Cypriot Federated State (TFSC)¹¹ in 1975 and subsequently the TRNC in 1983 as a parliamentary democracy with semipresidential features. The euphoria of the military triumph and the unilateral declaration of independence reinforced the institutionalization of ethnic nationalism among TCs while fixing Northern Cyprus as a "home" for the community. Such policies involved a variety of measures, including alteration of the names of settlements, construction of statuses representing the griefs of TCs, and the declaration of days for commemorations as organizational routines. An additional part of the creation of a Turkish "home" in the north was promoting migration from Turkey. Nationalist leadership also benefited from the anxiety and trauma caused by intercommunal tensions and constructed ethnopolitical narratives and historiography to enhance the self-image of victimization among community members and, in turn, provide them with a sense of ontological security. Indeed, the boost in TC ontological security was an important part of the legitimation of Cyprus's division and separate statehood in the north, alongside material benefits such as physical security, spoils of war, and provision of employment.

As mentioned earlier, however, identities shaped by ethnic nationalism are usually contested by nondominant groups in de facto states that compose alternative narratives and self-conceptions. In the TRNC, this contestation has been pursued through Cypriotism, which stresses the island's differences from both Greece and Turkey while endorsing a collective Cypriot identity and a federal solution to the Cyprus dispute. Although it remained a marginal ideology that was popular among leftist circles until the 1990s, Cypriotism gained prominence during the 2000s, especially among the younger generations, because of a series of factors, including migration from Turkey and accompanying cultural tensions with mainlanders, fear of political subordination and loss of cultural identity, Europeanization, and the impacts of the RoC's effective counter-recognition strategies.¹² For instance, GCs managed to secure court judgments from the European Union (EU) that imposed restrictions on TCs' trade and communications with the outside world. Apart from their destructive economic effects, such restrictions also intensified identity debates within the community and, in turn, damaged the ontological security and internal legitimacy of the TRNC. As Jakša (2017, 41) noted, nonengagement enhances de facto states' isolation, which compels them to turn inward and question their own identity. Nonengagement also weakens a de facto state's ontological security by preventing the formation of routinized interactions with significant others.

Indeed, the TRNC's deep-rooted ontological insecurities stem from the failure to routinize its relationship with its patron or its parent state. Although Turkey remains the only country that recognizes the statehood of the TRNC, most of the time Turkish political actors use narratives that

equate Northern Cyprus with any province in Anatolia. The TRNC's reliance on Turkey for performing some state functions, which is reinforced by nonengagement, also prevents a stable relationship between TCs and Ankara. For instance, the *de facto* entity largely relies on Turkish credits to finance its budget deficits, as it cannot borrow from international financial institutions and Turkey delivers a considerable amount of aid annually (Sonan and Gökçekuş 2020). On the other hand, although GCs recognize the political equality of the TCs in peace negotiations, most GC leaders do not distinguish them from ethnic minorities on the island, such as Armenians, Maronites, and Latins in their discourses.¹³ GCs' unilateral actions and measures undermining efforts for a federal solution may also raise doubts about the genuineness of the recognition of the other community's political equality.

Failure to construct stable routines with significant others and rising identity debates in the last two decades generated a sense of discontinuity while undermining the ontological security of the TRNC. This, in turn, enabled nondominant groups to compete with the nationalist leadership of the entity in their claim to be the main ontological security provider for the TC community. Since early 2000s, various opposition parties, nongovernmental organizations, and trade unions have managed to convince large segments of TCs that the only way to protect their unique identity is the reunification of Cyprus under a federal arrangement and subsequent EU membership. It was indeed this perception that advanced the attractiveness of Cypriotism, which reached at its peak level during the Annan Plan period between 2002 and 2004. This period witnessed the ultimate internal challenge to the legitimacy of the TRNC since the time it was established.

While the plan did not materialize because of GC rejection, the dynamics of the period undermined ethnonationalist legitimacy sources, ousted nationalist parties and leaders, while bringing their federalist rivals to power as they pursued a policy of engagement without seeking recognition. In fact, international actors and bodies, most notably the EU, extensively increased their level of engagement with the TC community in the wake of the referendum. Such engagement initially involved nonstate actors and technocrats to avoid an implied recognition (see Bouris and Kyris 2017; Kyris 2015) and eventually empowered them *vis-à-vis* public authorities as ontological security providers. However, as most TCs turned to federalist parties and elected Mehmet Ali Talat from the Republican Turkish Party (CTP) as their leader in 2005, the EU also began engaging informally with the officials of the TRNC. This informal engagement unintentionally enhanced the ontological security of the *de facto* entity as well as launched a unilateral process of Europeanization. Although the TRNC remained unrecognized, its status was upgraded by various international organizations, such as the Organization of Islamic Cooperation and the Council of Europe. Meanwhile, TC leaders held prestigious meetings with key European and American statesmen and diplomats. Rising hopes regarding greater engagement with the outside world, harmonization with EU laws, and an economic boom following the referendum through foreign direct investment enabled most TCs to feel ontologically secure.

Nonetheless, the enhancement of the TRNC's ontological security, which reinforced its internal legitimacy, proved to be short-lived. Soon, most TCs came to realize the limits of the engagement-without-recognition strategy as the RoC was quick to respond to the TRNC's softening of relations with the outside world with effective counter-recognition policies that prevented direct trade and flights between Northern Cyprus and Europe. Meanwhile, the disappointment among TCs in regard to the end of their isolation coincided with the deterioration of relations between Turkey and the EU and a series of fruitless peace negotiations with GCs. Most TCs felt particularly disappointed with the 2015–2017 talks, which resulted in the failure of two like-minded leaders, Mustafa Akıncı and Nicos Anastasiades,¹⁴ to achieve a common ground. Although the discovery of oil and gas riches near the coast of Cyprus was originally thought to be possible leverage to resolve the Cyprus dispute, the issue swiftly turned into a political crisis between Turkey and several EU members, especially following the unilateral decision of the GC leadership to start gas drilling process (see Kahveci 2017). Consequently, the past decade has witnessed mounting debates in regard to identity, relations with Turkey, and the appropriateness of parameters in peace talks with GCs. Polarization

between those who insist on federalism and those who prefer a two-state solution and closer ties with Ankara was also intensified by the contradictions between TCs' strong Kemalist tradition and the conservative/religious identity of Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP). Indeed, TCs split over AKP-backed policies and measures intended to encourage a revival of Islam in recent years, including the opening of new schools, the construction of new mosques, and the promotion of Islamic organizations (see Moudouros 2019).

Hence, the past decade has been characterized by continuing political limbo, rising identity debates, and prevalent frustration of the TC electorate, which brought party factions and new parties, such as the center-right People's Party (HP) and the nationalist Re-birth Party (YDP). The COVID-19 pandemic hit Northern Cyprus in this polarized political climate, in which the National Unity Party (UBP) dominated the coalition government with the HP while Akıncı was still the president. Moreover, the pandemic coincided with the presidential election of 2020, which was postponed because of coronavirus-related restrictions. As the TRNC moves toward a reinforced ontological insecurity while most TCs' confidence in the status quo is diminishing, political actors saw the pandemic as a chance to confirm their self-image and capitalize on it as an instrument to enhance their own legitimacy.

The Response of Northern Cyprus to the COVID-19 Pandemic as an Attempt to Address Ontological Security Challenges

As reported earlier, the TRNC was already suffering from deep ontological insecurities prior to the pandemic. In particular, most TCs were feeling increasingly insecure in regard to the relationship with Turkey, as a heated row between Akıncı and Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan revealed amid rising tensions between Ankara and the EU. Indeed, Akıncı had aimed to transform the relationship between Turkey and Northern Cyprus, opposed the conventional rhetoric of "motherland/babyland," and expressed concerns about becoming a "dependency" since his election as the TRNC president in 2015 (Kayaoğlu 2020). During his leadership, he also openly criticized some foreign policy actions of Turkey, such as its military incursion in Syria. Such narratives were intended to demonstrate TCs' capacity for self-agency, which, in turn, aimed at restoring their ontological security. In other words, rejection of "babyland" rhetoric/status was the federalist camp's response to the community's ontological insecurities stemming from asymmetric relations with Turkey as well as consecutive failures in peace negotiations with GCs. Meanwhile, the nationalist camp, most notably then Prime Minister Ersin Tatar, criticized Akıncı for jeopardizing relations with Ankara and undermining the Turkish side's bargaining power in negotiations while relying on nationalist narratives, rhetoric on the two-state solution, and greater engagement with Turkey to tackle ontological security challenges.

Then COVID-19 crisis hit Northern Cyprus on March, 10, 2020 and emerged as a new critical juncture endangering the ontological security and internal legitimacy of the unrecognized entity and its leadership. Prior to the detection of the first case, both the government and opposition leaders were quite relaxed in their approach to the coronavirus outbreak. In response to the closure of several checkpoints between the north and the south of the island by RoC authorities, Prime Minister Tatar stated that the issue was being overemphasized while condemning the unilateral decision of GCs (*Kıbrıs Postası*, "Tatar: "Koronavirüs Abartılıyor," March 2, 2020). TC opposition parties also evaluated the decision as political rather than cautious and backed demonstrations organized by civil society organizations in the buffer zone of Nicosia (Hatay 2020). Soon, the very first case of COVID-19 was announced in the north by Health Minister Ali Pilli: a German tourist staying in a Famagusta hotel. Hundreds of tourists and hotel staff were quarantined immediately for 14 days to prevent the spread of the novel virus. On March, 12, 2020, the government closed all schools, including universities, which have a high proportion of international students, and prohibited mass gatherings. Meanwhile, foreigners were barred from entering the TRNC with certain exceptions. Since tourism and higher education are the drivers of the TC economy, such

preventive measures posed a significant economic challenge for the de facto state. In fact, most TCs were still feeling the destructive effects of the ongoing Turkish currency and debt crisis that had begun in 2018. This critical juncture, however, concurrently provided the governing right-wing parties, especially the UBP, as the dominant party of two coalitions during the pandemic, with a valid excuse for economic challenges and the prospect to secure their nationalist identity alongside the “protector” role of “motherland Turkey.”

The absence of quick European solidarity with the hardest-hit countries, such as Italy and Spain, justified already existing nationalistic and isolationist tendencies among TCs. Nationalist columnists criticized the EU for excluding TCs, who are considered to be European citizens, in their struggle against the pandemic and mockingly called on the bloc to impose a “coronavirus embargo” on the TRNC (Şafaklı 2020). Columns also associated the pandemic and successive restrictions with TCs’ “struggle for survival” during the enclave period of 1960s while displaying confidence quotes to boost the society’s self-esteem, such as “we can succeed again” (Hatay 2020, 4). Meanwhile, many TCs used social media to call on the government to implement more severe measures against the virus, including a lockdown. In fact, the small size of Northern Cyprus, which brings more straightforward and reciprocal modes of communication between citizens and authorities, put the government under intense pressure to take timely decisions and employ effective measures. Open access to politicians and the members of the Higher Committee for Infectious Diseases contributed to the political responsiveness of the TRNC authorities concerning demands for a lockdown.¹⁵

Obviously, the fact that the pandemic hit the unrecognized state in the midst of the presidential elections also obliged all candidates, including incumbent Akıncı, Prime Minister Tatar (UBP), Foreign Minister Kudret Özersay (HP), and the leader of the main opposition, Tufan Erhürman (CTP), to be more responsive, which, in turn, shaped pandemic decisions while adjusting the leadership competition to the success of crisis management. For instance, President Akıncı, who mostly functions as the community’s peace negotiator with little say and responsibility in domestic politics, called for an immediate state of emergency, which was rejected by the prime minister. Instead, the government imposed new restrictions, such as suspending flights from the worst-affected countries and closing public offices except essential services, while highlighting that it had no intention of suspending democracy.

In an apparent contradiction, TC presidential elections were soon delayed for six months because of the health crisis. Although the postponement of the elections extended Akıncı’s leadership until the fall of 2020, it also provided all candidates, especially the governing UBP’s leader Tatar, an opportunity to capitalize on the crisis, since public debates focused on the ongoing pandemic, thereby preventing wider discussion about other crucial issues. As stated earlier, effective management of a health crisis can become a source of self-esteem, particularly in de facto states, which often suffer from long-lasting ontological insecurities. In this regard, authorities in Northern Cyprus implemented a series of practices displaying competence in crisis management.

As a first step, the government started repatriating its citizens from countries that were hardest hit by the pandemic, especially students studying in the United Kingdom. The United Kingdom’s early “herd immunity” strategy and slow response to the outbreak, which caused a high death toll among minorities, intensified pressure on the government to bring thousands of TCs to the island and provide them with free quarantine facilities. Even if the repatriation caused controversy in the public and even brought a mini-crisis between the president, prime minister, and foreign minister, the program was relatively successful. A particularly noteworthy case during the repatriation that demonstrates the contentious nature of presidential elections arose when some students complained of unhygienic conditions in quarantine centers. Anxiety among their families brought three candidates to the premises—Akıncı, Erhürman, and Özersay—each looking to exploit the issue to gain the upper hand against their rivals and boost their own popularity.

While TC nationals were safely brought “home,” foreign students and workers who were stuck on the island were provided with limited aid by the authorities and faced a rising tide of xenophobia

and racism. Indeed, Tatar came under fire following his controversial statements concerning foreign laborers while discussing his government's new coronavirus economic aid package on television. Regarding the welfare of foreign workers during lockdowns, Tatar stated that "the responsibility lay with those who had brought them here not the government. They were a problem before the COVID-19 and the crisis provided an opportunity to 'clean them out' ... It is not racism, but we have to protect our own citizens" (Ruwoko 2020). Such narratives revolving around protection, the right to return "home," and ethnic solidarity actually helped rebuild borders between TRNC citizens and others, thereby contributing to the reconstruction of a more exclusive TC identity shaped what Bieber (2020a, 15) called "exclusionary nationalism."

This insight was also reflected in some of the government's economic measures amid the first lockdown that began in late March 2020, such as the employment assistance fund, which provided laborers with aid packages and grants of £1,500. The measure originally covered only TRNC and Turkish nationals, whereas thousands of employees from other countries were excluded. Such developments triggered a wider debate on identity, citizenship, racism, and statehood in the de facto entity. Various trade unions, nongovernmental organizations, opposition parties, and some mayors harshly criticized the government's approach during lockdowns. While CTP MP Fikri Toros described the measures as inhumane, unfair, and unacceptable, Nicosia mayor Mehmet Harmancı from the federalist Communal Democracy Party (TDP) and YDP leader Erhan Arıklı accused the government of racism and exploitation (*Kıbrıs Postası*, "Üçüncü ülke vatandaşları görmezden gelindi, hükümet tepki topladı," March 26, 2020). Nevertheless, the government was quick to respond by changing its policy following growing criticism from employers and the public. It also implemented other economic measures, such as the suspension of cost-of-living adjustments and rent payments, a fund of £750 million to back producers, postponement of credit card charges for living expenses, and reductions in electricity bills. In fact, such measures to support the private sector came at a cost to public sector employees, who faced a temporary pay reduction (approximately 25 percent). Public institutions such as municipalities and foreign representative offices also experienced wage structuring and a decline in financial aid. Meanwhile, Ankara provided Northern Cyprus with £73 million aid as well as masks, disinfectants, test kits, and medical equipment used in the struggle against the coronavirus. Considering the substantial decline in revenues due to pandemic-related restrictions, Finance Minister Olgun Amcaoğlu stated that the TRNC would need £3.3 billion in aid while praising the "motherland's" generosity and support for TCs, who could not have tackled the COVID-19 pandemic without Turkey's help (*Kıbrıs Genç TV*, "KKTC'nin mali geleceği için hali umutluyum," May 19, 2020).

While the government relied on nationalist narratives and Turkish support to boost societal morale, the president sought assistance, aid, and engagement from international institutions. Akıncı instrumentalized the pandemic to increase the level of international engagement in an effort to enhance TCs' ontological security in the global arena. Indeed, engagement is strongly attached to the ontological security of a de facto state in times of health crisis by means of humanitarian aid from international actors, which the entity uses as a hallmark of statehood. In a letter to Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, director-general of the World Health Organization (WHO), Akıncı requested the inclusion of pandemic-related developments/data in Northern Cyprus in the official statistics of the WHO, while appealing to the global community to have direct communication with the TC side (Arslan 2020). Although such calls remained largely unanswered by most countries and institutions for fear of implied recognition, the EU transferred €5 million of the €30 million that had already been assigned to the TC community for the struggle against the coronavirus. Through the UN Development Programme and the Bicomunal Health Committee, the bloc also provided essential medical equipment to the north and declared a number of economic measures, including the provision of grants to small and medium-sized businesses operating in the region.

Moreover, Akıncı negotiated with Anastasiades, who agreed to send medical supplies used in treating COVID-19 cases to the north as a goodwill gesture. However, this brought the TC president

and prime minister into another discursive battle concerning the authority, legitimacy, and statehood of the TRNC. Tatar blamed the TC leader of transferring the medicines to the north without the approval of the Ministry of Health and said, “This is against the constitution. We are a state, not a tribe,” while Akıncı responded mockingly by stating, “We learned from this announcement that we have committed a major smuggling crime” (*Hürriyet*, “KKTC’de ‘Corona Virüs’ siyasete sızdı! Yardım krizi tansiyonu yükseltti,” November 5, 2021).

By early May, TCs were celebrating the end of the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic as the last patient was discharged from hospital. Tatar announced that the “TRNC successfully managed the COVID-19 pandemic,” while Özersay highlighted the low number of cases (108) and death toll (4) in a letter to the WHO. He added that “he will be sharing with WHO information as regards the measures implemented by his government, which led Northern Cyprus to this success story in the hope that it will set a positive model for other countries” (Bayar 2020). Representing an unrecognized state as a role model in a global crisis and a virus-free territory in the Mediterranean aimed at not only enhancing TCs’ ontological security but also attracting tourists as a remedy for economic challenges amid the pandemic.

Although Northern Cyprus’s relatively successful handling of the first wave was a matter of pride and a source of social solidarity and unity for the TC community, developments in the second half of 2020 aggravated political polarization in the de facto entity ahead of the rescheduled presidential elections. Taking advantage of post-pandemic pridefulness, UBP candidate Tatar announced that the resort town of Varosha (Maraş), which had been fenced off since the 1974 division of Cyprus, would be partially opened with the support of Ankara. The opening was also welcomed by the Islamic Trust of Cyprus (Evkaf), which claimed ownership of a large segment of the “ghost town” and increased and expanded its activities, appearance, and voice in recent years. The foundation’s increasing visibility, especially during the pandemic, can be associated with Ankara’s political agenda of raising the influence of religion in the public life of TC society.

Although this pre-election political maneuver sparked widespread controversy both in Cyprus and in the wider world, and even led to the collapse of the coalition government with the HP,¹⁶ it can also be interpreted as an attempt to demonstrate the Turkish side’s capacity for unilateral action vis-à-vis GCs. Indeed, the move posed an ontological threat to GC identity, considering the significance of Varosha in the community’s self-narratives and the expectations for its return following a peace deal or even as part of a confidence-building measure given the absence of civilian settlement in the area. Noting that the opening of Varosha broke the mold, Tatar stated that “the TRNC must be strengthened and this can only be done with the support of Turkey” (*BBC News Türkçe*, “Maraş’ın kısmen açılması, Kuzey Kıbrıs’ta seçimi nasıl etkiler?” October 9, 2020). Undoubtedly, this vastly controversial and highly publicized move aimed to revitalize nationalist sentiments among TCs and enhance their ontological security in a period of extreme uncertainty to ensure a high enough turnout among right-leaning voters. As Browning and Joenniemi (2015) suggested in their study on Finnish-Russian conflict over Karelia, threats to territorial status quo can constitute a source of ontological security/insecurity for postconflict societies. While election campaigns and the tight race between Akıncı and Tatar revealed the high degree of polarization, the victory of Tatar with a slight majority demonstrated anew that nationalism still provided a powerful source of identity for many TCs, and thereby a safe instrument for augmenting internal legitimacy of the TRNC amid the pandemic. In his victory speech, Tatar personally showed gratitude to Erdoğan for his support and highlighted a “new future” envisioning a two-state solution for the Cyprus dispute.

Meanwhile, TCs began feeling the effects of the second wave of the pandemic with new cases reported as restrictions eased. The return of the coronavirus to Northern Cyprus was attributed to imported cases after relaxing border control measures and “pandemic fatigue”¹⁷ (Evren and Evren 2021). As the number of new cases remained steady without decline, the main opposition CTP leader Erhürman accused the government of short-sightedness and mismanagement (*Kıbrıs Postası*, “Tufan Erhürman: Şu an yaşadıklarımızın nedeni ikinci dalga değil, öngörüsüzlüktür,” October 14, 2020). The government rapidly responded by inaugurating an emergency hospital in

Northern Nicosia that was built in 45 days with Turkey's funding and support on the occasion of the TRNC's thirty-seventh establishment anniversary. Erdoğan personally attended the opening ceremony and stated, "This hospital is the most important sign of solidarity between Turkey and the TRNC," while Tatar said that "the hospital is ready, the health system has become stronger, the TRNC continues to become stronger in front of the eyes of the world" (Aydin 2020).

In addition to the hospital opening, Erdoğan and Tatar also attended a controversial picnic on the beachfront of Varosha. Both Erdoğan and nationalist TC officials attempted to create a sense of normalcy in celebrating the foundation day of the de facto entity to boost solidarity and ethnic identity, whereas GCs and some left-wing TCs described the visit as an act of provocation. Such narratives about rising power in global arena and unilateral steps regarding the Cyprus dispute indeed aim to provide a sense of confidence and ontological security for both the TRNC as well as its citizens, whose isolation was reinforced by the pandemic.

In January 2021, TC authorities began inoculating the north's population against COVID-19 with 20,000 doses of the Chinese Sinovac vaccine that had been sent by Turkey. The first vaccine was administered to Tatar at the new emergency hospital, followed by Prime Minister Ersan Saner and Health Minister Pilli. Speaking to journalists, Tatar said, "While Turkey started to vaccinate its own people, it did not forget us, and sent 20,000 vaccines," and Pilli thanked Erdoğan and Turkey's health minister, Fahrettin Koca: "As always, Turkey is with us in the fight against COVID-19 as well" (Bayar 2021). Both politicians joined several world leaders who publicized their images while getting jabs to reassure and convince citizens to follow suit. This was particularly challenging for the TC leadership given that the Sinovac vaccine had not been approved by the WHO or the European Medicines Agency at that time. Meanwhile, the EU declared that TCs would be included in the EU-wide vaccination plan. Tatar immediately attempted to capitalize on this statement and use it to prove the TRNC's statehood by seeking direct engagement with the EU. In a meeting with UN representative Elizabeth Spehar, he stated that "the EU is our interlocutor, not the GCs and therefore any vaccine should be given directly to the TCs, and not through the RoC government" (*Kıbrıs Postası*, "Ersin Tatar: AB'den gelecek aşı konusunda muhabatımız Rum Yönetimi değil, AB'dir," January 13, 2021). Shortly thereafter, the EU sent 1,000 doses of the vaccine developed by Pfizer-BioNTech through the Bicomunal Health Technical Committee. As many TCs were initially upset by the relatively low number of doses, especially from Europe, multiple actors in Northern Cyprus, including mayors, opposition parties, and trade unions, soon instrumentalized the vaccine diplomacy to bring a greater number of doses and boost their popularity. As mentioned earlier, ruling elites in unrecognized states compete with domestic and external actors who seek to delegitimize such entities while augmenting their own legitimacy.

Furthermore, the vaccination program became a political power struggle and rivalry within the major party of the coalition government. In February, Prime Minister Saner sacked Pilli as health minister and replaced him with the former tourism minister, Ünal Üstel. Pilli's dismissal came as a shock to many, as Saner had described him as "one of the best health ministers in the world" (*Yenidüzen*, "Dünyadaki en başarılı Sağlık Bakanları'ndan dedi, görevden aldı," February 20, 2021) just weeks before his decision, and enhanced anti-government sentiment among many, including some supporters of the UBP. Indeed, a group on social media in support of Pilli attracted thousands of members within hours of being established. The general secretary of the TC Teachers' Union, Şener Elcil, evaluated Pilli's dismissal as "an indicator that the northern part of the island is being ruled by interest groups with links to Ankara" (*CDF Press Review*, "TCC Press Review," February 24, 2021). He also blamed Tatar for thwarting the delivery of COVID-19 vaccines and other medical equipment sent by the EU, as well as forbidding representatives of Pfizer to cross to the north to give briefings on its vaccines. Meanwhile, the opposition CTP mayor of Geçitkale, Hasan Öztaş, claimed that they had run out of vaccines and the system collapsed due to the shortage (Öztansu 2021). Throughout the spring of 2021, more vaccines of various types, including those produced by Sinovac, Pfizer-BioNTech, AstraZeneca, and Johnson & Johnson, arrived in Northern Cyprus from both Turkey and the EU.

However, the vaccination program continued to be the subject of various controversies and debates. Early in May, the TC Chamber of Commerce, Chamber of Industry, Building Contractors Association, and Hoteliers Association organized a demonstration on the grounds that the inoculations sent by the EU for the entire island were not fairly distributed according to the population.¹⁸ CTP leader Erhürman also took ownership of the issue and stated “Neither the EU’s attitude is acceptable, nor is those who fail to receive the amount TCs deserve” (*Kıbrıs Postası*, “Tufan Erhürman: “Ne AB’nin tutumu kabul edilebilirdir ne de Kıbrıs Türk halkının hakkı olan miktarı almayı beceremeyenlerin,” May 9, 2021). Meanwhile, some opposition columnists criticized Turkey for sending only doses of the Sinovac vaccine, although it began administering Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine, amid concerns over its efficacy against the new Delta variant (Mutluyakalı 2021). Üstel defended the use of the Sinovac vaccine in response to such criticisms and stated that “the world has closed its door on us. Our motherland gave us what we asked for. It’s AstraZeneca, not Sinovac, that should be infused with hesitation. Why the EU and south are sending us the AstraZeneca vaccine despite its risks?” (*Gıyınk Gazetesi*, “Üstel: “Tereddüt edilmesi gereken aşı Sinovac değil, AstraZeneca’dır,” June 18, 2021). Such public statements made by the health minister in defense of vaccines sent by Turkey evoke the rhetoric about the “motherland/babyland” relationship while strengthening the savior and protector identity of the former.

While the COVID-19 pandemic was exacerbating nationalist feelings, TC leadership also attempted to strengthen the TRNC’s ontological security by initiating new openings in regard to Varosha. On the 47th anniversary of the Turkish intervention, Tatar announced that a 3.5-square-kilometer section of the “ghost town” would revert from military to civilian control enabling GCs to reclaim their properties via the Immoveable Property Commission (IPC).¹⁹ Although Tatar justified the decision as a step to “fulfill human rights and eliminate grievances,” he also stated that “the opening is part of the two-state plan and the new policy” (*Cyprus Today*, “Tatar Claims Maraş Reopening Has GC Leader on the Back Foot,” August 7, 2021). Erdoğan also attended the events marking the anniversary while underlining Turkey’s backing for a two-state solution. As part of the celebrations, the first Friday prayers were held in Varosha’s Bilal Ağa Mosque with the virtual attendance of the Turkish president, showcasing his ideological blend of nationalism and Islamism. During his visit, Erdoğan also inaugurated various infrastructure projects while announcing the construction plans for a new presidential palace, a national park, and new premises for the TC parliament. Although this came as a disappointment to many who were expecting more concrete steps toward the TRNC’s recognition,²⁰ Erdoğan justified the project as an expression of statehood (Cupolo 2021). Such plans and the vision of language essentially aimed at manifesting a state-specific form of agency and the notion of ontological security emerging during the pandemic.

By mid-August, more than 350,000 doses of various COVID-19 vaccines were administered in the northern part of Cyprus. Furthermore, third doses began being administered in an attempt to boost antibody levels among those already vaccinated. Nonetheless, the vaccination program is still sparking debates and controversies as the COVID-19 pass certificates (named AdaPass) issued by the TRNC are not widely accepted, with many students studying in the United Kingdom having to quarantine upon arrival. Once again, different actors (state and nonstate) have been engaged in intense competition to provide a solution for affected individuals which may contribute to undermining the internal legitimacy of the unrecognized entity. On one hand, the TRNC government refused to provide the RoC authorities with the personal information of TCs who wish to travel as proof of separate statehood. On the other hand, “this country is our platform,” an umbrella organization that brings together left-leaning political parties and trade unions, blamed the government and the presidency for alienating TCs while negotiating with the GC leadership and claiming the solution of the problem. The organization’s joint statement declared that “the partitionist camp who are responsible for the loss of TCs’ EU process in 2000s is continuing to politicize health issues and the vaccination process while victimizing the society” (*Haber Kıbrıs*, “Bu Memleket Bizim Platformu: Aşı girişimimiz olumlu sonuçlandı,” August 16, 2021). Meanwhile, CTP MP Fikri Toros stated, “I am condemning the representatives of this separatist mentality who

satisfy their so-called nationalist egos by disregarding international law and practices which further isolates TCs from the outside world” (*Kıbrıs Postası*, “Fikri Toros: Kıbrıslı Türkleri dünyadan koparmakta ve yalnızlaştırmakta olan ayrılıkçı zihniyeti kınıyorum,” August 2, 2021). Eventually, the RoC announced that TCs would be able to obtain an EU Digital COVID Certificate after submitting the required documents, including a flight ticket. Such debates are indeed reminders of overlapping claims to sovereignty and authority, the existence of multiple legitimacy audiences, and particular challenges to the ontological security in de facto states. All in all, various actors in Northern Cyprus capitalized on the pandemic to secure their identity and consolidate power through different legitimization strategies. None, however, could escape the impacts of unrecognized, which remains the ultimate threat to TCs’ ontological security.

Conclusions

This article has examined the response of the self-declared TRNC to the COVID-19 outbreak and the impact of the pandemic on the reconstruction of legitimization practices and narratives from an ontological security perspective, with an aim to reveal how critical junctures may provide opportunities for unrecognized states in pursuit of internal legitimacy and status in the global arena. It first highlighted the importance of a secure identity in attaining legitimacy while addressing the nexus between critical junctures and ontological security, particularly in postconflict settings and de facto states. Next, attention was paid to the origins of TC identity and state building and the roots of the community’s ontological insecurities in regard to relations with the parent and patron states from a historical point of view. The article then illustrated how ethnic nationalism and international engagement serve the self-identity needs of TCs and have been exploited by various political actors operating in Northern Cyprus over different periods of time. Finally, the article exemplified the utilization of the pandemic in shaping legitimization strategies and narratives of the de facto state’s political elites struggling for power.

As mentioned in the introduction, there has been growing interest recently in the relationship between the pandemic, nationalism, and ontological security. The dynamics of this relationship in postconflict settings, however, have been largely neglected in the literature. This study has gone some way toward enhancing our understanding of ontological security in such settings by focusing on how self-conceptions can be secured during critical junctures in the context of unrecognized statehood. Under conditions of ultimate uncertainty brought into sharp focus by the pandemic, the societal need for a secure and stable self-conception becomes even more critical, especially in ontologically shaky postconflict settings. By examining the response of Northern Cyprus to the COVID-19 pandemic, it is suggested that health crises are effectively instrumentalized by political actors in de facto states in securing nationalist identities and/or international engagement with the aim of achieving a higher degree of internal legitimacy and status in the international arena.

Although crises simultaneously generate ontological security and insecurity for such entities, political rivals in unrecognized states who face preexisting self-identity challenges because of extreme uncertainty and peace anxieties are well prepared to reverse the negative effects of the pandemic on legitimacy through various strategies and narratives.

Since the quest for ontological security is fundamentally a political process that strengthens some political actors over others while legitimizing certain types of political acts, ontological security/insecurity is a condition that can be manipulated and mobilized by political elites in pursuit of their political goals and interests (see Loizides 2015; Rumelili 2015). Critical junctures that bring exceptional challenges to our sense of self allow competing political elites of de facto states to secure their identities through various practices, shape interest perceptions at the community level, and justify their own preferences in peace negotiations while undermining the legitimacy of other options. Indeed, psycho-cultural anxieties and interest-based concerns are closely intertwined in postconflict societies and interests themselves presuppose still deeper identities. During the COVID-19 outbreak, right-wing TC leaders and parties often regenerated nationalist narratives

associated with past crises to reconstruct Turkey's "savior" image, portray the de facto entity's performance in managing the crisis as a success story, and took unilateral steps toward GCs to manifest a sense of political agency. Such ontological arguments favor secessionist preferences among the TC community while delegitimizing reunification based on a bizonal, bicommunal federation. On the other hand, left-wing federalists largely rely on a quest for greater engagement with the outside world amid the health crisis as a means to enhance self-identity and legitimate authority while delegitimizing the status quo.

The findings of this study suggest that the COVID-19 pandemic, as a critical juncture, reinforced the ontological security of the TRNC and advanced its nationalist elites' leverage by upholding their claims to secession and a two-state solution while reconstructing TC identity exemplified by nationalism, which has taken a turn in an exclusionary direction. In less than a year since the coronavirus emerged, Northern Cyprus gradually set on a path away from its parent state and the EU with a nationalist president and prime minister in place for the first time since 2015. These findings reveal that nationalism has found a renewed sense of purpose and meaning in unrecognized states amid the pandemic by providing an important source of identity and pride that allows individuals to cope with the anxiety and ontological insecurity induced by the outbreak. Indeed, the pandemic generated a fertile ground for reproducing nationalist identity narratives that reinforced the TRNC's biographical continuity and hence its ontological security. Such critical junctures, which empower nationalist and anti-globalist trends, also function as an apparatus helping de facto states in their claim to be the main ontological security provider for their citizens vis-à-vis competing internal and external actors. The crisis empowered the capacity of the TRNC to demonstrate state-specific forms of agency through pandemic-related measures and discursive practices while enabling unilateral actions in relations with the parent state. In fact, the incumbent elites of Northern Cyprus rely heavily on ontological security to sustain their legitimacy given the economic slowdown in the contested territory as a result of major declines in revenues in the tourism and higher education sectors.

Nonetheless, boosted ontological security of the TRNC and its nationalist elites may gradually erode in the post-pandemic era as the crisis will not provide unlimited legitimation given rising debates about TC identity, growing political polarization, economic challenges, and delegitimizing acts of political rivals and external actors. Even if nationalism provides a strong instrument for elites in their quest for a secure identity and internal legitimacy, it is only one among multiple sources of ontological security whose conditions are unstable and contested among political actors. As proposed by Rumelili (2015), the set of meanings and narratives through which one societal group pursues ontological security may engender ontological insecurity for others. While nationalist narratives and unilateral actions ease ontological anxieties of some TCs amid the pandemic, engagement with international institutions and the parent state has significantly impacted the terms on which ontological security is pursued by others. Furthermore, counter-recognition strategies placate ontological anxieties of most GCs who fear that any attempt to ease the isolation of TCs could constitute a step toward eventual legitimization of their unrecognized state. Indeed, the RoC undertook various endeavors to delegitimize the TRNC and/or its institutions during the pandemic. The failure to recognize vaccination certificates issued in the north, the EU's reluctance to establish direct contact with TC authorities, and the strong rejection of the two-state proposal by both GC leadership and Brussels stand as prominent examples of international delegitimization attempts of the de facto entity. Earlier this year, the president of the European Commission stated that the EU would "never accept" a two-state solution to the dispute (*Ekathimerini*, "Von der Leyen: EU Will Never Accept Two-State Cyprus Solution," July 6, 2021), while Anastasiades said "there is not one single chance of Turkish side succeeding in this" (Kambas 2021).

As the lack of common ground between the two sides leaves little optimism, reunification talks are unlikely to resume soon, which may lead to ever-greater dependence of the TRNC on its patron state. Even states that are viewed as friendly to Turkey have not taken any concrete step to recognize the TRNC or establish diplomatic ties with it despite sympathizing with the position of TCs. On the

other hand, the federalist camp's endeavors in terms of ontological security provision by means of greater engagement with the parent state and the EU during the outbreak are also constrained by the former's fear of implied recognition. Such concerns prevent meaningful cooperation between the island's two communities when it is required more than ever. This lends support to previous findings in the literature concerning comparable cases, such as Lupovici's (2015) study on Israel, which concluded that ontological insecurity in deeply divided societies stemming from the multiplicity of identities and the inability of political actors to concurrently address them hinders cooperation between conflicting parties and spoils comprehensive resolution attempts. The results also share a number of similarities with Çelik's (2015) findings on Turkey's Kurdish issue, where asymmetric ontological security/insecurity felt by conflicting groups can thwart further engagement and dialogue which are essential to build sustainable peace. This is relevant in the case of Cyprus as well considering the ontologically securer position of GCs, who often question the legitimacy of TC political actors. Further research on other unrecognized states or postconflict societies is required to broaden the understanding of connections between ontological security, legitimation, and the effectiveness of conflict resolution strategies in times of critical junctures such as the ongoing pandemic. At the time of this writing, coronavirus infections continue to rise in Northern Cyprus because of the easing of restrictions, pandemic fatigue, and the spread of the more contagious Delta and Omicron variants—thus the trajectory of post-pandemic TC politics and the peace process remains uncertain. The eventual effects will obviously depend on the duration and intensity of the COVID-19 crisis, the measures taken to mitigate its impact, and political actors' ability to respond to post-pandemic challenges and opportunities.

Disclosures. None.

Notes

- 1 For a detailed discussion on the dynamics of democratization in unrecognized states, see Caspersen (2011).
- 2 "Turkish side" refers to the Republic of Turkey and the TRNC.
- 3 "Siege mentality" refers to a socio-psychological state in which members of a community believe that the rest of the world has relatively negative intentions concerning them (Bar-Tal 1986).
- 4 For a detailed discussion of the competition between various types of authorities in the realm of ontological security provision, see Zarakol (2017).
- 5 The UN proposal was named after Secretary General Kofi Annan and attempted to settle the Cyprus dispute with the establishment of a bicommunal, bizonal federation. The plan was backed by much of the international community as well as the majority of TCs, yet it has not been implemented because GCs rejected it in a referendum.
- 6 Preamble, Constitution of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, 1985, <http://www.mahkemeler.net/anayasa>. (Accessed June 22, 2021).
- 7 The *millet* system refers to the Ottoman administration of separate religious communities that were semiautonomous in overseeing their communal affairs.
- 8 *Cemaat* refers to a nonterritorial confessional community.
- 9 "Turkification" involved changing Greek names of TC settlements into the Turkish language, promoting trade within the TC community, and building new schools and mosques. *Taksim* refers to the partition of the island between Greece and Turkey, whereas *enosis* refers the unification of Cyprus with Greece.
- 10 While TCs claim that they were forced out of the RoC, the dominant narrative on the GC side has been that the TCs mounted an insurrection against the government in 1963.
- 11 The TFSC was established as an early step toward a constituent state of a future bizonal and bicommunal federation in Cyprus.

- 12 Counter-recognition strategies of parent states aim to contest the secession and prevent the recognition and international legitimacy of seceded de facto states, which include a series of activities such as diplomatic protests, trade restrictions and propaganda (for a detailed discussion see, Beachin, Comai, and Zurabashvili 2016).
- 13 These communities are legally defined in the Constitution of Cyprus within the GC community as they opted to belong during the establishment of RoC. Alptekin (2010) argued that TC and Cypriot minority policies constitute a historical legacy of the Ottoman *millet* system.
- 14 Akıncı is known as a strong advocate of federalism in Cyprus, while Anastasiades's Democratic Rally supported the Annan Plan in 2004.
- 15 For a detailed discussion of size and legitimacy, see Veenendaal (2013).
- 16 Although Özersay supported the reopening of Varosha, he criticized Tatar for not informing him regarding the decision in advance and turning the issue into an instrument of election campaigning. On the other hand, incumbent Akıncı and federalist parties blamed Ankara for meddling in the campaign to enhance Tatar's popularity ahead of the elections. Eventually, a new coalition government was established between three right-leaning parties: the UBP, the YDP, and the Democratic Party.
- 17 "Pandemic fatigue" refers to feelings of distress in the members of affected societies as a response to the prolonged state of crisis.
- 18 By that time, TCs had received just 6 percent of COVID-19 vaccines that were sent to Cyprus from the EU.
- 19 The IPC was established in 2005 by TC authorities under pressure from the European Court of Human Rights to redress the losses of GCs who fled south after 1974.
- 20 Before Erdoğan's visit, speculation circulated about the possibility that Azerbaijan, Pakistan, or Kyrgyzstan would establish a diplomatic mission in Northern Cyprus or even recognize the de facto state.

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