



# Urban Insecurity, Contested Governance, and Civic Resistance at the Colombia-Venezuela Border

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RESEARCH



## ABSTRACT

Drawing on the case of the Cúcuta Metropolitan Area, this article explores how illicit cross-border flows and territorial conflicts shape urban space and security at the Colombia-Venezuela border. Conceptually, it approaches the border as infrastructure (Dijstelbloem 2021) and brings Idler's 'border effect' (2019) into a dialogue with Sassen's 'urban capabilities' (2012). The article builds on original empirical data gathered in interviews and focus groups. It shows, first, that the illicit flows of goods, people, and services facilitated by a porous border have contributed to a situation of territorial contestation between the state and violent non-state actors (VNSAs) in Cúcuta. The article discusses four interrelated dynamics that have affected the city's security: the urbanisation of territorial contestation; violent struggles over authority and trafficking routes trickling into urban neighbourhoods; the exploitation of vulnerable city dwellers by VNSAs; and the militarisation of public space. Second, the article analyses the role of illicit flows in the making of unequal patterns of space-making both from below – as in the case of gasoline smugglers building informal settlements – and from above, with well-off corrupt city dwellers defending their affluent neighbourhoods financed by laundered money. Finally, the article goes beyond perspectives of vulnerability and violence by demonstrating that the border also represents a civic opportunity that can stimulate urban renewal and resistance.

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In July 2021, Colombian President Iván Duque sent 600 soldiers to the Metropolitan Area of Cúcuta. As part of the ‘Plan Integral de Seguridad San José’, the Military Police and Special Forces he deployed were mandated to enforce order in ‘strategic sectors’ (*La Opinión* 2021d). According to the 30<sup>th</sup> Army Brigade commander, the goal was to ‘generate trust’ and to build ‘Peace with Legality ... in Norte de Santander’.<sup>1</sup>

Norte de Santander – and particularly the Catatumbo region – has been a main theatre of Colombia’s decades-long conflict with the ‘Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – Ejército del Pueblo’ (FARC-EP). In 2016, the guerrilla group and the government, then led by President Juan Manuel Santos (2010–2018), signed a Peace Accord. Nevertheless, state sovereignty remained contested, with violent non-state actors (VNSAs), including criminal, paramilitary, and insurgent groups, competing over territorial control, especially along trafficking routes of illicit goods such as cocaine.

According to a study of Fundación Ideas para la Paz, Catatumbo represents ‘the weak link in the territorial transformation’ envisioned by the Peace Accord (*Garzón Vergara et al. 2020: n.p.*). Two events of 2020 illustrate this. The above-mentioned military deployment was announced only three weeks after the compound of the 30<sup>th</sup> Army Brigade had been hit by a car-bomb attack wounding 36 people. The government suspected organised criminals or the ‘Ejército de Liberación Nacional’ (ELN) – now Colombia’s leading rebel group and de facto authority along parts of the border with Venezuela (see *HRW 2020*) – to be behind the attack (*El Tiempo* 2021b). Shortly thereafter, the helicopter transporting President Duque and his Defence and Interior Ministers was shot at near Cúcuta (*BBC* 2021).

In this context, where neither soldiers nor politicians are protected effectively, the situation for regular citizens is even worse. In August 2020, at the height of Colombia’s first Covid-19 wave, over 50 civil society organisations issued an open letter: ‘Who will protect the lives and the rights of those of us living in the Metropolitan Area of Cúcuta?’ they asked, accusing the state of leaving them exposed to the manifold abuses of VNSAs and the concomitant ‘humanitarian emergency’.<sup>2</sup>

Drawing on the case of the Cúcuta Metropolitan Area, this article explores how illicit cross-border flows and territorial conflicts shape urban space and security at the Colombia-Venezuela border.<sup>3</sup> As O’Dowd argued, cities in border areas are ‘frontier zones in their own right, where the struggle over the state is most concentrated’ (*O’Dowd 2012: 167*). These struggles often intersect with the flows of illicit cross-border economies moving through urban hubs.

The present analysis builds on original empirical data (see details below). Conceptually, it departs from the understanding of borders as infrastructure (*Dijstelbloem 2021*), and it brings Idler’s ‘border effect’ (2019) into a dialogue with Sassen’s ‘urban capabilities’ approach (2012). In 2021, García Pinzón and Mantilla (2021: 278) pointed to the dialectic condition of the Colombia-Venezuela border as both ‘a place of despair’ and ‘a source of hope’. In order to make sense of this situation, I seek to make a two-fold argument. First, I argue that the illicit flows of goods, people, and services facilitated by the porous border have contributed to a situation of territorial contestation between the state and VNSAs in Cúcuta. This has translated into urban insecurity and has been a driver of inequality, reflected in the unequal patterns of urban space-making. Second, and not limiting myself to an analysis of vulnerabilities and violence, I introduce the concept of the border as a *civic opportunity*. I argue that the border location can shape citizens’ resources for urban renewal and resistance in the spirit of Holston’s ‘insurgent citizenship’ (2009).

The article proceeds as follows. The first section embeds the case study into scholarship on the urban condition in Latin America. In a second step, the key concepts are introduced. Third, the article sets the stage for the analysis by attending to the subject of Cúcuta’s conflictive geographical context. The fourth section then shows how conflicts intersecting

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1 <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=207579111277093> (Accessed 22 July 2021).

2 <https://verdadabierta.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Comunicado-ONG-Catatumbo.pdf> (Accessed 7 June 2021).

3 This article expands on a short essay published in Emergent Conversation 13 ‘ILLICITIES: City-Making and Organized Crime’ of PoLAR: Political and Legal Anthropology Review (see *Hochmüller 2021*).

with illicit economies shape urban space and security. It does so by: (a) examining how the border location affects urban (in)security; (b) zooming in on the ways illicit cross-border flows influence patterns of urban space-making or 'zoning processes' (Sergi & Storti 2021: 142) – both from below, illustrated in attempts of the urban poor working at the interstice of the informal and illicit economy to claim the right to the city by means of informal settlements, and from above, with well-off city dwellers re-investing their illicit gains in the construction of wealthy neighbourhoods; and (c) discussing how the border can become a civic opportunity and driver for urban renewal and resistance. The article concludes with a summary of the key findings and implications of this research.

## THE LITERATURE: TRANSNATIONAL FLOWS AND THE URBAN CONDITION AT THE BORDER

In his seminal study 'The Urban Question', Castells showed that 'the *social production of spatial forms*' is key to understand the urban condition (1977: 17; original emphasis). His argument of the urban reflecting dominant forms of 'social organization' (ibid.: 115) has informed scholarship that approaches the Latin American city as a space where international capitalist patterns of production and exploitation intersect with local power struggles. In the context of large-scale industrialisation in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, urbanisation in the region gained unprecedented pace. While in 1950 around 40 per cent of Latin Americans lived in cities, it was close to 80 per cent in 2015.<sup>4</sup> Once Latin America entered the neoliberal era in the 1980s, the effects of the 'fundamental contradictions of capitalist development' (Angotti 2013: 5) became visible. Urban inequality and violence started to grow, reflecting the asymmetric power relations both 'within and between cities of different sizes and economic specializations' in the Global South (Davis 2017: 6).

Scholars have provided a multitude of analyses of violence and resilience in the region's major and secondary cities (e.g., Durán Martínez 2017; Koonings & Kruijt 2015). The growing urban spaces located at the geographical margins of the nation-state, however, have only recently started to receive scholarly attention. Secondary cities in borderlands tend to 'have closer economic and cultural ties with surrounding areas' paired with the 'strong international connections' that we would usually associate with the global city (Perry et al. 2020: n.p.), but in a more tangible sense of cross-border flows structuring the city materially, economically, politically, and socially. They often also constitute strategic hubs for transnational illicit economies and areas where state rule is contested (Jenss 2020; see also Davis & Hilgers 2022).

Adding to this scholarship, the present study focuses on illicit cross-border flows and the border's effect on urban space and security. Going beyond the International Relations literature on borders – which is more concerned with questions of national sovereignty and security (e.g., Avdan & Gelpi 2017) – this article departs from the premise that borders shape 'mundane spaces, routine practices, and affective/lived experience' (Nyman 2021: 314). While an emergent literature on the peripheries of the Latin American nation-state holds insights on the social, political, and criminal dynamics of borderlands (e.g., Idler 2019), we still only know little about the 'granular and often haphazard ways in which borders infiltrate ... populations [and] landscapes' (Dijstelbloem 2021: 3) in urban spaces, and even less on the border's role in the emergence of urban capabilities.

Here, a look into recent research published in this journal is helpful to grasp how illicit economies shape cities. Wennmann et al. (2021: 72) have advanced the view that infrastructures of licit economies and the '[u]rban connectivity offer[...] significant opportunities for illicit trade.' Sampaio (2021) has further pointed to the importance of 'urban resources' for conflict actors. This can be observed in the Colombian border zones, where VNSAs engage in 'bordering practices' (García Pinzón & Mantilla 2020) and function as alternative suppliers of goods and services, including security.

Scholarship on other borderlands in Latin America, such as the US-Mexico and the Guatemala-Mexico border, offers promising insights for the analysis of the border's influence on urban

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.bbva-research.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Urbanization-in-Latin-America-BBVA-Research.pdf> (Accessed 3 September 2021).

space and security, and particularly the dialectics of border cities oscillating between spaces of vulnerability and spaces of resistance. Amoore and Hall (2010: 301), for instance, have described borderlands as distinctive and ‘theatrical’ spaces, where ‘repetitive sequences of the border’ bring the ‘very idea of security’ into being and turn sovereignty into a performative act. This perspective points to three key dynamics in border cities. First, *different security logics* overlap in border cities ranging from national security to citizen security (Andreas 2009; Martin 2020). Second, border cities produce a particular *mode of subjectivity*, with violence, exclusion, and uncertainty at its centre (see Salazar Gutiérrez 2014: 132). Third, these modes of subjectivity can also lead to *resistance*, when cross-border mobilities alter practices of citizenship. These practices can then become drivers of societal change (Kron 2016).

## ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK: CONTESTATION AND CAPABILITIES AT THE BORDER

The article draws on three concepts to enquire how borders contribute to ‘illicit city-making’ (see the introduction to this Special Issue). First, the border is approached as an infrastructure (Dijstelbloem 2021) that defines the urban condition at the state’s margins. Second, the article explores how wider conflict and crime dynamics of borderlands influence urban (in)security through Idler’s concept of the ‘border effect’ (2019). Third, by drawing on Sassen’s work on ‘urban capabilities’ (2012), the article discusses what makes border cities attractive to criminal and conflict actors, and what city dwellers (can) do to cope with violence.

The focus on infrastructure plays an increasing role in urban studies to assess how urban spatial configurations (e.g., enclaves and gated communities) and the circulation of goods, people, discourses, and imaginations shape the city by remaking both material and social spaces (e.g., Anand et al. 2018). From this perspective, the border as a built structure can be approached as a driver of illicit economic activity, particularly where borders are porous. A clear example of infrastructures as ‘matter that enable the movement of other matter’ (Larkin 2018: 329), borders ‘create the grounds on which other objects operate’ (ibid.). As Dijstelbloem (2021: 9) has put it, ‘borders are both concrete and abstract, both material and ideational’. Like other material artefacts and technologies, border infrastructures therefore contribute to spatial and social ordering. As such, borders become a component of the ‘socio-material coproduction’ of urban spaces (see Pilo’ and Jaffe 2020: 10).

Idler (2019: 79) argued that borders possess agency as they ‘shape the social, political, and economic phenomena in borderlands’. Her work shows that the Colombian borderlands are sites of conflict and ‘strategic trafficking nodes where multiple illicit flows intersect’ (Idler 2020: 338), over which state and non-state actors compete. At times, alliances among these actors emerge (ibid.). Idler explains this situation through the lens of the ‘border effect’, which is based on three interdependent factors: limited state governance; an environment that holds little risk but provides high economic opportunities due to the porosity of the border; and the possibilities the border provides for illicit actors to evade prosecution (Idler 2019: 21). Idler has demonstrated that the border effect exacerbates existing insecurities in border communities. She identified four dimensions of the border effect, namely the border as a *facilitator* of violence and victimisation, a *deterrent* of trust, a *magnet* for VNSAs and illicit economic activities, and a *disguise* that makes local nuances of violence invisible and reinforces the stigmatisation of border areas and their inhabitants as inherently violent (ibid.: 21–22).

While providing valuable analytical insights, Idler’s approach mostly renders the border a vulnerability, echoing the state of the scholarly debate (e.g., Sabet 2009). However, the research informing this article suggests a high degree of civil society resistance to insecurity. Therefore, I propose adding the dimension of the border as a *civic opportunity* that underlines the complex city-making effect, contrasting city communities’ vulnerability and subjection to illicit flows and processes.

To do so, I will draw on Sassen’s (2012) ‘urban capabilities’ approach that not only explains why VNSAs seek to exploit urban spaces located in conflict zones, but also points to the importance of (civic) resources in enabling urban dwellers and their cities to adapt to violence and insecurity, and to develop a strong sense of community. As Kaldor and Sassen (2020: 2) argued more recently, urban capabilities may even help ‘to detect embedded vectors that

can lead to the diluting or unsettling of conflicts in cities'. As spaces where new modes of co-existence are developed, cities further 'possess the capacity to make new subjects and identities' (ibid.: 15). This points to the dialectics of urban capabilities, which can be both an attractive resource to be exploited by non-state armed actors and a resource for city dwellers (e.g., to resist or cope with violence). Glass et al. (2022) situated Sassen's work between overly optimistic accounts on the urban condition and scholarship they describe as 'dystopian urbanization' research. I follow this 'third perspective', which 'recognizes both the potential of cities and their vulnerabilities' (ibid.: 3) and grasps the 'unstable and contingent' dimensions of urban spaces (Caldeira 2017: 7).

Approaching the border city from an analytical perspective that brings together the literatures on borders, infrastructures, and urban capabilities allows us to identify drivers of urban contestation and dynamics of urban insecurity facilitated by the border location, while at the same time transcending the perspective of vulnerability and violence. The concept of the border as a civic opportunity that this paper seeks to advance thereby unveils potential drivers for resistance on the city level and outlines ways to reimagine the state and citizenship from the geographical margins.

## DATA AND METHODS

The article is based on original empirical data gathered in 2020 and 2021.<sup>5</sup> In February and March 2020, I interviewed representatives of international organisations and the Colombian state authorities in Bogotá. I further co-organised a forum with colleagues of the University of Oxford's CONPEACE initiative<sup>6</sup> in the capital that has brought together representatives of the Colombian national government, police, and military, as well as international organisations, academics, and civil society. Fieldwork at the border had been scheduled for the second half of 2020 but was eventually conducted remotely due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Online research included a small survey (circulated among local interlocutors in July 2020 to enquire about the pandemic's security and humanitarian impacts) and eight virtual focus groups (75–110 minutes each) conducted in November and December 2020<sup>7</sup> on the topic of community protection with 31 participants representing civil society, local and regional governments, and international organisations working in border regions. In order to zoom into the context of the Cúcuta Metropolitan Area, I then conducted three remote in-depth interviews (45–60 minutes each) in June and July 2021. These interviews with an aid worker, a business sector representative, and a curator (all based in Cúcuta) have provided insights on capabilities with an emphasis on local development and economy, civil society organisation, as well as culture and the arts. Memos on the focus groups and interviews have informed the qualitative content analysis on which this article is based. After identifying themes and patterns of both urban contestation and capabilities, the data were triangulated with statements and operational plans of the country's security forces, reports of NGOs and international organisations, and newspaper coverage.

The next section introduces the geographical setting of conflict and crime at the Colombia-Venezuela border. After that, the article will zoom in on the analysis of urban space and security in Cúcuta.

## THE CONTEXT: COLOMBIA'S CONTESTED BORDERLANDS

Following the 2016 Peace Accord, the FARC-EP guerrilla has left behind a governance void in many parts of the country. As deep-rooted inequalities, insecurities, and key drivers of conflict such as land distribution and the cultivation of coca (see Rettberg 2020) have remained unaddressed, other VNSAs, in particular the ELN guerrilla and paramilitary groups, have

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<sup>5</sup> Research ethics approval has been granted by the University of Oxford (see details on the Central University Research Ethics Committee ethical review process here: <https://researchsupport.admin.ox.ac.uk/governance/ethics>). Informed consent has been given by all participants. Whenever participants agreed, focus groups and interviews have been recorded.

<sup>6</sup> See <https://conpeace.ccw.ox.ac.uk/>. The initiative is now hosted by the Global Security Programme, Pembroke College, University of Oxford.

<sup>7</sup> The survey and the focus groups were conducted together with colleagues of the CONPEACE initiative. The author thanks Ana María Bossward-Marin, Annette Idler, Juan Masullo, Dáire McGill, and Julia Zulver for the cooperation.



attempted to take control of marginalised areas (see [HRW 2020](#)). In December 2020, the UN Verification Mission in Colombia voiced their concern over the level of violence in the country.<sup>8</sup> Cases of abuse and human rights violations increased during the Covid-19 pandemic amidst the humanitarian emergency related to Venezuelan mass migration, hitting vulnerable border communities hardest.

While critical of the peace deal signed by his predecessor, President Duque (2018–2022) implemented a policy called ‘Peace with Legality’.<sup>9</sup> One of its ten pillars is the ‘transformation of territories’ through Territorially Focused Development Plans (PDET), expected to stimulate production and investment and to improve education and infrastructure in conflict-affected areas.<sup>10</sup> After a start described by some interviewees as promising in terms of citizen participation, the PDET roll-out<sup>11</sup> slowed down while the security situation in contested areas remained tense and the state’s presence limited to its security forces. This can best be observed in the Future Zones, which are part of the PDET approach.<sup>12</sup> In Catatumbo, located in the Norte de Santander department (see [Map 1](#)), the Colombian government has set up a Future Zone supported by over 10,000 soldiers. As civil society organisations complained in a statement to the US Congress in 2021, rather than ‘opportune and effective responses’ to existing problems, this programme ‘has contributed to persistent high rates of violent actions against the population, as evidenced by the increase in numbers of homicide, forced recruitment of minors, and sexual violence; as well as the expansion of paramilitary structures’.<sup>13</sup>



**Map 1** Norte de Santander and Tachira.<sup>14</sup>

Five years into the slow implementation of the Peace Accord ([Kroc Institute 2020](#)), Colombia is a society ‘in transition’ where different spatial and temporal conflict/peace dynamics overlap (see [Mac Ginty 2021](#)). The dividing lines between the state and VNSAs are also blurred, together with the boundaries between licit and illicit economies. Taken together, these blurred lines turn Colombian border areas, including cities like Cúcuta, into cases where ‘licit and illicit practices coexist in social life and are together imbricated in state processes’ ([Abraham & van Schendel 2005: 7](#)).

<sup>8</sup> [https://colombia.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/en\\_n2037701.pdf](https://colombia.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/en_n2037701.pdf) (Accessed 19 May 2021).

<sup>9</sup> See for details: <http://www.posconflicto.gov.co/Documents/politica-estabilizacion-Paz-con-legalidad.pdf> (Accessed 17 May 2021).

<sup>10</sup> Opening speech of President Duque at the International Seminar on the Implementation of the Peace with Legality Policy, 24.2.2021. Own transcript.

<sup>11</sup> 5 of the 16 PDET sub-regions are located at the border, see <http://especiales.presidencia.gov.co/Documents/20170718-pdet/que-son-pdet.html> (Accessed 18 May 2021).

<sup>12</sup> Conference ‘Peace and development in uncertain times’, Bogotá, 2 March 2020. Own transcript.

<sup>13</sup> <https://colombiapace.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/LetterCatatumbo.pdf> (Accessed 24 July 2021).

<sup>14</sup> © OpenStreetMap contributors, Colombia Mapping Project, <https://wiki.openstreetmap.org/wiki/Colombia> (Accessed 7 April 2022).

Colombian state authorities decisively shape these dynamics. First, as a peacebuilding advisor has criticised, there is a lack of coordination of the state's protection policy, which in her view remains informed by national security thinking rather than 'a perspective of peace'.<sup>15</sup> This is an effect of the government's stabilisation strategy, of which the above-mentioned PDET and Future Zones are main components. Rather than applying a citizen security policy, the Colombian government continues to focus on counterinsurgency (see Piccolino & Ruetten-Orihuela 2021) and the defence of (international and national) capitalist interests by a variety of means – including military ones (see Meger & Sachseder 2020).

Second, the focus on national security tends to render 'competitive local authoritarianisms' (Albarracín et al. 2021) invisible. These authoritarian structures have grown at the border over decades. Rather than being absent, the Colombian state is 'very active and politically driven' (Beach 2018: 7), with state officials seeking to secure the power of local elites and to obstruct democratisation processes that would endanger their power (Albarracín et al. 2021). These local authoritarianisms, rather than the oft-repeated myth of the absent state, must be understood as key drivers of violence, as they fuel local discontent and inform rather common perceptions of borderland inhabitants of the state as just another violent conflict actor.<sup>16</sup>

The insecurities and the state interventions that seek to address them – such as the Peace with Legality policy – influenced security well into the urban core of the Cúcuta Metropolitan Area. As Mantilla (2020: n.p.) has stressed, Cúcuta's 'proximity to the Catatumbo region' is crucial to understanding its condition as 'a particularly vulnerable city'. Catatumbo is home to VNSAs 'involved in supply chain relationships', most importantly cocaine trafficking (Idler 2019: 110). A representative of the business sector also sees a significant 'part of the social burdens of the Metropolitan Area [coming] from Catatumbo'. He therefore stressed the importance of the PDET to generate economic development and investment in the region.<sup>17</sup> Another interviewee working with an international organisation pointed to the complexity in rural Colombia that is 'intrinsically connected to the question of territorial control of armed groups'.<sup>18</sup>

VNSAs operating in the Cúcuta Metropolitan Area seek to acquire spatial control of both the border itself – controlling unofficial border crossings (so-called 'trochas') – and of local marketplaces located in the urban centres where they launder assets and sell illicit commodities including protection. This turns them into governance actors seeking to strengthen their grip over strategic parts of the city, including communities along the trafficking routes, where 'they provide fear in order to then sell security'.<sup>19</sup>

In Cúcuta, security threats common in the region's contested urban spaces, such as gang crime, extortion, and homicides, intersect with insurgent and paramilitary violence related to territorial disputes and conflicts over trafficking routes and business hubs.<sup>20</sup> This leaves border communities exposed to multiple forms of violence. While advisors, for instance of the Presidential Stabilisation and Consolidation unit, assure they work closely with the police and the armed forces to provide protection,<sup>21</sup> the deficient character of the protection mechanisms – and the feeling of being abandoned by Bogotá – was mentioned repeatedly by research participants.

While on the national level homicides fell to a historical low in 2020, with 23.79 per 100,000,<sup>22</sup> violence remains wide-spread and multi-faceted across Colombia's border areas. However, as the border works as a *disguise* – one of the components of Idler's (2019) border effect – some

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15 Interview with official (2) of an international organisation, Bogotá, March 2020.

16 See CONPEACE forum, 'The double crisis in the Colombian borderlands: addressing the humanitarian-security nexus' (Bogotá, February 2020), online focus groups with civil society representatives from the Colombia-Venezuela and Colombia-Ecuador border, November 2020, and online focus groups with international organisations representatives, December 2020.

17 Remote interview with representative of the business sector, Cúcuta, 1 July 2021.

18 Interview with official (1) of an international organisation, Bogotá, March 2020.

19 Remote interview, curator, Cúcuta, 5 July 2021.

20 Interview with official (1) of an international organisation, Bogotá, March 2020.

21 Panel discussion at the International Seminar on the Implementation of the Peace with Legality Policy, 24.2.2021. Own transcript.

22 <https://www.cgfm.mil.co/es/blog/en-2021-avanzaremos-en-mejorar-resultados-historicos-de-2020> (Accessed 19 May 2021).

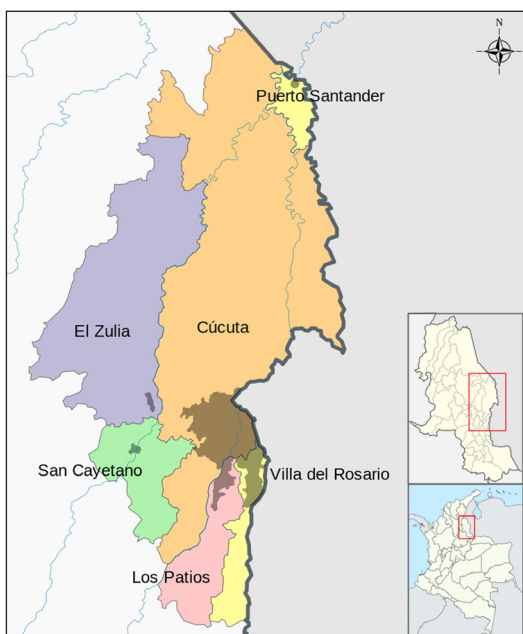
forms of violence are rendered invisible, and border regions are stigmatized as inherently violent. Insecurity disproportionately affects those fighting for better lives for their communities. More than 1,200 social leaders have been killed in the post-Peace Accord period (as of April 2022).<sup>23</sup> The situation at the border is particularly bleak. In 2018, in Norte de Santander alone, 173,202 people were forced to leave their communities (*La Opinión* 2018b). In 2020, the department witnessed a wave of massacres (*El País* 2020). The Colombian NGO Indepaz reported 91 massacres in 2020, and 21 of those massacres were perpetrated in regions bordering Ecuador and Venezuela, claiming the lives of 340 people.<sup>24</sup> In Cúcuta, 238 homicides were registered in 2020, an increase of 30.1 per cent compared to 2019 (*Carvajal* 2020).

The next section zooms in on the city of Cúcuta to analyse how contested governance, cross-border illicit flows, and violent conflict shape urban space and security.

## ILLICIT FLOWS, CONTESTED GOVERNANCE, AND CLAIMS TO URBAN SPACE

Cúcuta is a hybrid city, Cúcuta is a border city in all its meanings. Cúcuta is a city that has a character that is totally ... permeated by the Venezuelan culture ... And Cúcuta is also a border city in the sense that it's a city where everything, always, is at its limit.<sup>25</sup>

The Metropolitan Area of Cúcuta (see [Map 2](#)), with the city San José de Cúcuta at its core (see [Map 3](#)), was created in 1991 and expected to advance regional economic development. The local government invested in infrastructure, such as bridges and roads, and turned the area into one of Colombia's 12 free trade zones with the US. Like other 'currently depressed border cities', Cúcuta was granted a 'special status to encourage further exports and export-oriented investment'.<sup>26</sup> As a free-market hub, the Municipal Area depends on the economic and political developments in Venezuela. The move towards internationalisation and the concomitant deregulation have also provided illicit economic opportunities, fuelling historically strong cross-border smuggling.



**Map 2** Metropolitan Area of Cúcuta.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>23</sup> <https://indepaz.org.co/> (Accessed 4 May 2022).

<sup>24</sup> <http://www.indepaz.org.co/informe-de-masacres-en-colombia-durante-el-2020-2021/> (Accessed 2 July 2021).

<sup>25</sup> Remote interview with curator, Cúcuta, 5 July 2021.

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.pcb.ca/post/columbia-free-trade-agreement-an-open-opportunity-for-canadian-businesses-2340> (Accessed 25 August 2021).

<sup>27</sup> © Map of the Cúcuta Metropolitan Area, created by Milenioscuro, [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/d/d2/Mapa\\_del\\_área\\_metropolitana\\_de\\_Cúcuta.svg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/d/d2/Mapa_del_área_metropolitana_de_Cúcuta.svg) (Accessed 8 April 2022).



Venezuela is a strategically important trafficking node for Colombian cocaine bound for the Northern consumer markets, and has long been a provider of contraband gasoline (see García Pinzón & Mantilla 2020). Cúcuta – together with the neighbouring Venezuelan city San Antonio de Táchira – has been described as an ‘illicit business hub where violent entrepreneurs meet to strike deals’ (Idler 2019: 110). Illicit economic activities allowed VNSAs to adapt with ease even in times of crisis. And there have indeed been many crises at the border, ranging from diplomatic tensions in the mid-2000s following the detention of a FARC leader in Venezuela (see Jiménez Aguilar 2008) to multiple border closures (for instance in 2020, when both countries closed their borders as a reaction to the Covid-19 pandemic; see Idler & Hochmüller 2020).

Home to over one million Colombians, the Cúcuta Metropolitan Area is also the destination of ‘pendular migration’<sup>28</sup> of hundreds of Venezuelans crossing over daily to work and buy products. It is further a major migration hub as well as a shelter for thousands of the 5.6 million<sup>29</sup> Venezuelan migrants and refugees (1.7 million of them settling in Colombia; UNHCR 2020) who left their country in response to political repression and a major economic collapse (in 2020, 92.9 per cent of the Venezuelan households lived in poverty).<sup>30</sup>

The Venezuelans entering through the two official border crossings in the Metropolitan Area of Cúcuta or using the ‘trochas’ to flee the dire conditions of their home country arrive at an inequitable city with a high level of absolute poverty that has doubled in recent years (*La Opinión* 2021c). According to the National Administrative Department of Statistics (DANE), Cúcuta was the city with Colombia’s highest unemployment rate in 2021 (20.4 per cent in July of that year).<sup>31</sup> Further, it is the country’s city with the highest citizen perception of insecurity (*La Opinión* 2021a). State provision of health services, education, and security – or lack thereof – is a constant concern. Limited formal economic opportunities have further turned Cúcuta into the city with Colombia’s highest informality rate (*La Opinión* 2021b). The absence of formal jobs is also creating a labour force reservoir for illicit economies. With thousands of Venezuelans settling in the city since the death of then Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez in 2013, this reservoir has increased even further. The cross-border illicit economies that for many have become the only chance of income take very concrete forms in the city – in both the metaphorical and the literal senses of the word, as the next sections will demonstrate.



Map 3 San José de Cúcuta.<sup>32</sup>

28 <https://www.ohchr.org/SP/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=24963&LangID=E> (Accessed 8 July 2021).

29 <https://reliefweb.int/report/colombia/unhcr-iom-aid-partners-call-urgent-support-refugees-and-migrants-venezuela-and-their> (Accessed 8 July 2021).

30 <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1235189/household-poverty-rate-venezuela/> (Accessed 8 July 2021).

31 <https://www.portafolio.co/economia/empleo/desempleo-en-colombia-mercado-laboral-555727> (Accessed 8 July 2021).

32 © OpenStreetMap contributors, Colombia Mapping Project, <https://wiki.openstreetmap.org/wiki/Colombia> (Accessed 7 April 2022).

According to the Fiscal and Customs Police (POLFA), VNSAs increasingly expand their control over the cross-border smuggling business. These groups also engage in drug trafficking. They further aim to constitute as governance providers along some parts of the border including in urban neighbourhoods. Among those groups are (post-)paramilitary organisations such as ‘Los Pelusos’, ‘Los Rastrojos’, the ‘Clan de Golfo’, and insurgent groups such as the ELN.<sup>33</sup> This points to one dimension of Idler’s border effect, namely the border as a *magnet* (Idler 2019), as the closeness of the border attracts VNSAs seeking to effectively control the ‘trochas’. However, as mentioned above, rather than an example of an absent state, the case of the Cúcuta Metropolitan Area reflects the influence of local authoritarian orders that include state and non-state actors, including the ‘[o]utsourcing [of] state violence to paramilitaries’ (Meger & Sachse 2020: 959). Since the 2000s, Cúcuta has become a key area for Colombian paramilitarism. As Quiroga Gómez showed (2007: n.p.), by ‘infiltrat[ing] legal production and local politics [in Cúcuta], the paramilitary groups achieved to co-opt power groups through political and economic agreements, and/or the deterrence and acting of violence’. Paramilitaries provided private security, engaged in extortion, and invested in legal businesses as well as informal ones such as gasoline smuggling (ibid.). A study by García Pinzón and Trejos (2021) also suggests close links between paramilitarism and local political structures in the city of Cúcuta. They point out, however, that only one mayor has officially been held accountable for his links to paramilitary groups (ibid.: 100). As an interviewed Cucuteño explained, the current paramilitarism is connected to larger structures aiming at territorial control and goes beyond local neighbourhood watches.<sup>34</sup> Another interlocutor paints a similar picture. In his view, ‘this mafia and this violence are inevitably connected to what’s happening at the trochas’.<sup>35</sup>

As then Director of the Municipal Police of Cúcuta Colonel José Palomino has put it, VNSAs competing over territorial control have erected ‘invisible barriers along the border’ (WRadio 2020). Between Norte de Santander and Táchira alone, up to 250 of those informal border crossings (‘trochas’) exist, with POLFA counting 21 in Cúcuta in 2020. To put this into perspective, along its 1,378 miles of border with Venezuela, the Colombian state only runs seven official border crossings. In light of this, it is not surprising that even the frequent border closures did not halt cross-border smuggling and other illicit flows (e.g., Parra 2018). ‘It’s not a hyper-controlled border’, one interviewee said, ‘but a border that, by closing it, the two states turn their backs [and] it is left in the hands of [armed] groups’.<sup>36</sup> This provides VNSAs – and corrupt state officials – with opportunities to expand their control over the population and the illicit markets.

As drug trafficking decreased during the Covid-19 pandemic, due to shortages of required resources to produce coca paste, VNSAs have further diversified their illicit activities. For instance, they intensified their involvement in illegal mining and focused more on taxing informal border crossings. In this context, territorial disputes between these groups have intensified, as an advisor of the Presidential Office’s Border Unit reported, with Cúcuta having experienced the most violent month in four years in May 2020.<sup>37</sup>

Transnational trade flows can also translate into violence in urban spaces. While in the Colombian city of Buenaventura, the port is the key infrastructure shaping urban insecurity (Jenss 2020), illicit flows in Cúcuta are channelled by the border. This reflects a component of Idler’s border effect, namely the border as a *facilitator* (Idler 2019) of illicit economies. The border has turned Cúcuta into what an aid worker has described as ‘a trafficking field of all sorts of goods’.<sup>38</sup> In the Cúcuta Metropolitan Area, VNSAs compete over trafficking routes and local marketplaces with illicit competitors and with the state authorities. In the city, this translated into ‘crimes such as micro-trafficking, assassinations, and extortion’, making ‘complaints of the population

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33 <https://pares.com.co/2018/08/30/tres-anos-de-cierre-de-la-frontera-no-han-acabado-el-contrabando/> (Accessed 8 July 2021).

34 Remote interview with curator Cúcuta, 5 July 2021.

35 Remote interview with representative of the business sector, Cúcuta, 1 July 2021.

36 Ibid.

37 CONPEACE initiative, University of Oxford, Covid-19 survey, July 2020.

38 Remote interview with aid worker, Cúcuta, 11 June 2021.

suffering from the unease of a situation like that ... frequent' (*El Tiempo* 2020b). And while in the everyday life of Cúcuta's *comunas*, or city districts, micro trafficking is of more concern than large-scale drug trafficking, human bodies regularly appear in the Metropolitan Area's rural zones, which according to one interviewee 'implies that there is – inside the Metropolitan Area of Cúcuta – a fierce fight between [armed] groups over territorial control both over the businesses related to the illegal borders and ... drug trafficking'.<sup>39</sup>

Ariel Ávila of Fundación Paz y Reconciliación illustrates how the border is also a *deterrent* (Idler 2019) of mutual trust – another dimension of the border effect – fuelling conflict across the borderline. According to him, 'the strongest violence happens in the Metropolitan Area because the ELN now has the hegemony on the Venezuelan side and is aiming for full control of the Colombian side, and obviously all those smaller groups, the most important being the Rastrojos, will try to resist' (cited in *Caracol* 2021).

The border location thus affects urban (in)security in four interrelated ways. First, the territorial contestation becomes urbanised. While conflict-related violence used to be concentrated primarily in the rural settings along the border with Venezuela, 'it has been felt with more force in the neighbourhoods of Norte de Santander's capital' (*Carvajal* 2020), particularly since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic and intensified territorial struggles. In February 2020, the ELN planted bombs in Cúcuta and there were shootouts near the border during the group's 'armed strike' (*El Tiempo* 2020a). More recently, in August 2021, the group was one of the main suspects behind yet another bombing, this time with a police station as its target (*El Tiempo* 2021a).

Second, the violence of the illicit economies trickles into neighbourhoods: Cúcuta's Secretary of Citizen Security sees a connection between VNSAs, territorial fights, local drug-trade, and the border: '[t]he comuna that shows most homicides is number 6, it's adjacent to the rural zone and neighbourhoods close to the Modelo prison and the road connecting to the border municipality of Puerto Santander' (*Carvajal* 2020). In 2018, comuna 6 had been described as the 'epicentre' of 'strategic [importance] for the criminal groups' due to the intersection of 'routes and illegal trochas', which has then fuelled a 'social crisis and violent crisis' (*La Opinión* 2018a). According to a local human rights defender, the violence is related to battles over the control of illegal border crossings among the narco-paramilitary group 'Los Rastrojos' and the ELN guerrilla (*Carvajal* 2020).

Third, poor city dwellers – particularly also Venezuelan migrants and refugees – are exploited by criminal actors. As one interviewee stated, the Venezuelans 'have a much higher risk' of being victimised because they 'have occupied risk zones' in the city where they co-habit with the most vulnerable parts of the population.<sup>40</sup> Both established inhabitants and newcomers not only need to navigate complex environments of illicitly governed areas, they must also fight for their place in the city, often having to resort to the illicit economies. As a representative of the municipal government of Villa del Rosario municipality said, the sector 'La Parada', where many of the Venezuelans were stranded during the border closures in 2020, was most affected by human trafficking at the hand of VNSAs. Support from Bogotá, however, was limited, as the municipality is categorised in register 4 (out of 6).<sup>41</sup> This speaks to a broader malaise at the border, namely militarisation, the fourth dimension of urban (in)security in Cúcuta. As local interlocutors have criticised, the state's presence at the border often remained limited to military outposts and police stations. In October 2020, the Colombian army and police introduced a mission called 'Operation Wall' (*Operación Muralla*) along the 'trochas' connecting Cúcuta with its Venezuelan neighbouring municipalities of San Antonio de Táchira and Ureña (*Agencia Efe* 2020). The Cúcuta municipal government has further launched programmes to recuperate public spaces ranging between militarised and more community-focused interventions. In 2021, Cúcuta's municipal government has commissioned its Citizen Security Directorate to roll out security councils or 'mesas de seguridad'. These councils aim at improving the government's understanding of the security situation in crime-affected neighbourhoods. As a local newspaper reports, '[t]he municipal administration has informed that community leaders

<sup>39</sup> Remote interview with representative of the business sector, Cúcuta, 1 July 2021.

<sup>40</sup> Remote interview with aid worker, Cúcuta, 11 June 2021.

<sup>41</sup> 1 being the poorest, 6 the best-off areas this register defines where public spending goes. See: Online focus group with local government representatives, December 2020.

and the Metropolitan Police have created diverse strategies so that Cúcuta ... transforms into a “100 per cent safe city” (*La Opinión* 2021e). The programme is a combination of situational and community crime prevention programming seeking to improve the material and the social infrastructures of the city. Not only is public lighting installed, crime reporting is also encouraged and a more close-knit community is regarded as a potential asset in the fight against urban insecurity. The programme furthermore aimed at ‘improving social cohesion’, as the president of a community council who was welcoming the municipal government’s mesas de seguridad in his neighbourhood has put it.<sup>42</sup> Others, like a social leader from Cúcuta, have criticized the interventions in the public space as militarisation in the guise of ‘neighbourhood security’.<sup>43</sup>

## ILLICIT CROSS-BORDER FLOWS AND ZONING PROCESSES

As Friendly (2021: 2) reminds us, ‘[d]ebates on the right to the city are ... key for understanding the paradoxical nature of urban Latin America’. In this section, the urban paradox will be analysed by drawing on the spatial claims of those situated at the bottom and at the top of the illicit economies. As we have seen above, illicit incomes have nurtured VNSAs that expanded their presence deep into the urban core of the Municipal Area of Cúcuta. This has an impact on what criminological scholarship describes as ‘urbanistic and zoning processes’ (Sergi & Storti 2021: 142). Like in the case of organised criminal groups, VNSAs and those parts of the population involved in cross-border illicit economies do not passively ‘nest’ in the city; they actively co-construct urban space. I will now illustrate the concrete material dimension of illicit cross-border flows shaping urban space by drawing upon the example of housing struggles. This will provide insights into how the border location and the related illicit economic activities shape the ‘right to the city’ (Harvey 2008) both from below and above.

A striking example of processes from below is related to the contraband business. Historically key to Cúcuta’s highly informal economy, the recent decline of oil prices in Venezuela has put significant pressure on gasoline smugglers or *pimpineros*. As a group ‘located at the end of a long economic chain’ (Beach 2018: 3), the *pimpineros* operate outside the legal realm and represent the ‘coping or survival economy’ (Goodhand 2005: 211) part of the illicit economy. As a group ‘awkwardly stuck between several sovereign powers’ (Beach 2018: 3) they have a long history of unionising and making their voices heard in the political arena. For instance, on several occasions, ‘[t]hey reclaimed their right to work [by making demands] to the state’ even though their work is effectively illegal.<sup>44</sup>

The *pimpineros* have been engaging in ‘peripheral urbanization’, a process based on the local agency of marginalised city dwellers that engage in a set of practices to make symbolic, legal, or material claims (Caldeira 2017). For instance, the *pimpineros* have blocked roads and criticised the controls of the customs police. Lacking viable alternatives, they demanded that the police refrain from impeding the only economic activity that provided them with an income (see *RCN Radio* 2015). Many of those engaging in the contraband business live in vulnerable conditions. More organised smuggling rings have, however, ‘helped [their workers] to construct housing’.<sup>45</sup> This has translated into informal settlements (*asentamientos*) in the urban periphery, close to the main smuggling routes.

During the Covid-19 pandemic and the border closure period in 2020, precarity in these settlements has increased, as has the ‘pauperism’ in wider Cúcuta according to a local researcher.<sup>46</sup> As a World Bank study showed, Venezuelan mass migration has further exacerbated the dire urban living conditions in Cúcuta, as ‘human settlements are increasingly located in high-risk areas’ and are ‘established on low and erosional stubble soils unsuitable for building housing’ at the urban margins and beyond.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> See <https://youtu.be/rEan19401Es> (Accessed 21 August 2021).

<sup>43</sup> Online focus group with civil society representatives, 18 November 2020.

<sup>44</sup> Remote interview with aid worker, Cúcuta, 11 June 2021.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> CONPEACE initiative, University of Oxford, Covid-19 survey, July 2020.

<sup>47</sup> <https://blogs.worldbank.org/latinamerica/how-venezuelan-migration-changing-urban-expansion-cucuta-colombia> (Accessed 15 June 2021).

Illicit flows do not, however, only shape informal settlements of the poor but also the more prosperous parts of Cúcuta. As Angotti showed, ‘urban land became a new battleground for class warfare’ in Latin America both in its material and symbolic perspective (Angotti 2013: 6), and this includes the upper crust of those benefiting from the illicit cross-border economies. Illicit economies and the assets they generate are part of these struggles in Cúcuta. There is an increasing urbanisation of those parts of the Metropolitan Area of Cúcuta that the Colombian state classifies as the highest and most well-to-do strata 6.<sup>48</sup> The municipality is also the one with the fastest rise in real estate prices in the first trimester of 2021.<sup>49</sup> During a remote interview, a representative of the business sector shared a photograph over WhatsApp showing an ad in an affluent part of Cúcuta: *NO a la EXTINCIÓN DE DOMINIO – Protegemos su PATRIMONIO* [No to the expropriation of private property – we protect your assets]. It was issued by a law firm specializing in legal cases of expropriation related to asset laundering, in our case housing financed by means generated in the illicit economy. As the interviewee explained,

there is a large percentage of Cúcuta ... that is related to money laundering, not only of drug trafficking but also many other illegal activities. So, sure, these battles between different groups no doubt have an impact on sectors considering themselves business sectors. But, in the end, they are not much more than a part of the network of the drug-trafficking war.

The latter, according to the interviewee, is divided in two: one part is ‘drug trafficking that exploits peasants in the Catatumbo region ... and the other part is the part that lives very well and that is a thriving and affluent upper class connected to the laundering process’.<sup>50</sup>

After having discussed two processes of ‘illicit city-making’ from below and from the top of the illicit economy, the next section will assess how urban capabilities can turn into civic opportunity in the border city.

## THE BORDER AS A CIVIC OPPORTUNITY, OR: RE-CLAIMING THE BORDER CITY

In an interview, a curator working in Cúcuta criticised that the government-sponsored ‘spaces of citizenship construction’ – such as the mesas de seguridad introduced above – concentrated mainly on ‘spaces of social encounter or neighbourhood cultural centres in different strategic points of the city’.<sup>51</sup> This, however, was frequently considered overly top-down, informed more by clientelist and national security interests rather than local needs. An official of an international organisation explained that the Colombian state often approaches the protection of vulnerable parts of the population from a ‘criminological’ perspective, concentrating on risks rather than ‘community capabilities [*capitales comunitarios*]’, with state officials acting as ‘protectors’ rather than creating ‘environments of protection’.<sup>52</sup>

More than merely being inefficient in the provision of security, state authorities have at times also contributed to undermining citizen organisation. According to a social leader, grassroots community organisations are often operating ‘in a void’,<sup>53</sup> as community leadership becomes criminalised. This is a nation-wide phenomenon, and discursive hostilities have dreadful consequences for leaders that are stigmatised and thus put into severe danger. In a television interview, a human rights defender doubted that the government was interested in stabilising the border region because its very precarious legitimacy was resting on a ‘war discourse’. In response, he found himself labelled a ‘bandits’ spokesperson’ by the then Director of the Municipal Police, which turned him into a target of violence. These dynamics have turned activism for some civil society members into ‘high-risk work’, especially for those calling out the ‘increasing militarisation of the territory’.<sup>54</sup> As another social leader from Cúcuta explained,

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48 This layered system of strata is a classification or ranking of residential areas ranging from 1, the poorest area, to 6 representing the most affluent area.

49 <https://www.portafolio.co/mis-finanzas/vivienda/ciudades-de-colombia-con-los-precios-de-vivienda-mas-altos-y-bajos-555451> (Accessed 15 June 2021).

50 Remote interview with representative of the business sector, Cúcuta, 1 July 2021.

51 Remote Interview with curator, Cúcuta, 5 July 2021.

52 Interview with official (1) of an international organisation, Bogotá, March 2020.

53 Online focus group with civil society representatives, 18 November 2020.

54 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0YXFoF9pprY> (Accessed 22 August 2021).



'[w]e, the social leaders, have been criminalised. They say we belong to (armed) groups, they claim we promote disorder in the city'.<sup>55</sup>

While the divisive rhetoric and violence leave many city dwellers fearful community leadership prevails, and the level of civil society organisation is considered to be growing stronger (see [Mantilla 2020](#)). Reducing citizens to vulnerable subjects in need of protection misleadingly renders them passive and neglects their struggles over political participation. Zeiderman's (2016: 26) observations made in Bogotá also hold true for Cúcuta, namely that crises do not deprive city dwellers of their agency. What is more, risk discourses can even provide citizens with new tools to make political claims.

Given the perceived lack of state support for local initiatives, a social leader helped foster community self-organisation and resistance: 'I don't like pointing out problems without pointing to solutions'. He therefore decided to ignore the risks community leadership entails and contributed to establishing a community education programme that aims at strengthening citizenship and allowing city dwellers to make more effective claims toward the powers that be.<sup>56</sup> Similar community leadership can be found in violent urban spaces across Latin America. However, what makes Cúcuta – as a border city – unique is that local civil society have drawn on transnational bonds of solidarity to create new modes of challenging the established normative order, imaginaries of national belonging and national security, and the constitution of the nation-state.

Bustamante's (2004: 141) study on Norte de Santander and the neighbouring Venezuelan Táchira state suggests that there is more to the border region than conflict and violence. She argues that '[t]he condition as a border region facilitates ideological confrontation, but also the development of particular economic, political, and cultural activities'. Inhabitants of Cúcuta stress that the peripheral character of their city is a social construction that can be altered.<sup>57</sup> Historically, Cúcuta offered solid economic opportunities due to its border location. But with Venezuela in socioeconomic decline these advantages have in many cases turned into a liability. The neighbour's economic crisis has spilled over to Colombia, leading to a massive humanitarian crisis in the border regions. This intersects with conflict dynamics<sup>58</sup> and puts 'people that had a decent level of life ... in[to] very complex situations'. The pressure drug trafficking groups put on people's lives has 'strongly deteriorate[d] the situation in the city'.<sup>59</sup>

The city of Cúcuta does, nevertheless, offer 'a universe of opportunities if there's political will'.<sup>60</sup> Some argue that local governments 'could be doing much more than what they do' to address the manifold security problems.<sup>61</sup> Grassroots civil society organisations aim to go further than the local and national government. A curator stated that he thinks 'grassroots civil society organisations of Cúcuta who work with true commitment should get increasingly more range of action and possibilities and influence over public policy'.<sup>62</sup> Among youth, he continued, 'citizen conscience' is growing, giving rise to a 'sense of agency': 'We have seen how the culture and the artistic processes have converted into an element of social cohesion that allows ... strengthening and amplifying the critical mass of the citizenry that wants change'.<sup>63</sup> Further, grassroots civil society engages in lived solidarity with the newly-arriving migrants and refugees by implementing projects – sponsored by international partners like UNICEF and USAID – to strengthen solidarity. They aim at inoculating to inculcate civic values in the city's youth by means of participatory arts projects. Among the questions they address are xenophobia and class prejudices, and the declared objective is to break cycles of stigmatisation of migrants,

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55 Online focus group with civil society representatives, 18 November 2020.

56 Ibid.

57 In 1821, it had been at the heart of Andean politics, with delegates of Nueva Granada and the Confederation of Venezuela meeting in Villa del Rosario to draft and eventually ratify the first Constitution of the Colombian Republic, also known as the Cúcuta Constitution. See: [https://www.archivogeneral.gov.co/sites/default/files/exposiciones\\_patrimonio/ConstitucionesColombia/1821/Texto1821.pdf](https://www.archivogeneral.gov.co/sites/default/files/exposiciones_patrimonio/ConstitucionesColombia/1821/Texto1821.pdf) (Accessed 22 August 2021).

58 See CONPEACE forum, February 2020.

59 Remote interview with representative of the business sector, Cúcuta, 1 July 2021.

60 Remote interview with curator Cúcuta, 5 July 2021.

61 Remote interview with representative of the business sector, Cúcuta, 1 July 2021.

62 Remote interview with curator Cúcuta, 5 July 2021.

63 Ibid.

refugees, and the poor by strengthening a joint ‘border identity’ that allows inhabitants of border regions to ‘appreciate this fraternity’ by inviting them to share their stories of migration, diaspora, and exclusion.

As a civil society leader from the Catatumbo region argued, Colombian people have been made to believe that everything coming from Venezuela was bad.<sup>64</sup> Nevertheless, border communities at times would rather trust their immediate neighbours across the border than the political elites in Bogotá. This can translate into ‘a particular mode of public engagement, one that disturbs the possibility of authoritative, settled judgments’ (Amoore & Hall 2010: 302). These forms of engagement turn the border into a civic opportunity, making Cúcuta the potential ‘centre of the process of integration, the city leading this laboratory that history imposes on us’.<sup>65</sup>

A project of Fundación El Pilar,<sup>66</sup> for instance, provides a platform for citizen-driven arts projects aiming at integration. These projects include expositions, workshops, and conferences – often with prestigious international speakers. Such initiatives are complemented with participatory, citizen-driven research projects, and ‘a mediation programme ... that generates conditions that guarantee the universal access to vulnerable communities’.<sup>67</sup> Together, these projects seek to convert Cúcuta into a ‘transformative space’ by turning the ‘border burden’ (Sabet 2009) into an asset and changing the city through an inclusive dialogue between youth, local communities, migrants, and refugees, with the objective of interrupting the cycle of violence and societal division. As spaces where new modes of co-existence develop, cities ‘possess the capacity to make new subjects and identities’, which are the drivers for ‘subnational struggles for self-governance at the level of the neighborhood’ and can ‘push for a new normative order’ in the city and beyond (Kaldor & Sassen 2020: 15). This echoes the growing literature on urban peace(building) and the scholarship linking peace to spatial practices and new empowered agency (e.g. Danielsson 2020; Ljungkvist & Jarstad 2021). Border cities like Cúcuta thus seem to hold the potential to develop a form of ‘insurgent citizenship’ (Holston 2009) from the periphery, provide possible pathways of transforming violent into non-violent conflicts, and play a productive role in advancing conviviality and peace (see Danielak 2020).

## CONCLUSION

Drawing upon the case of the Cúcuta Metropolitan Area, this article demonstrated that the city’s border location has contributed to territorial contestation, insecurity, and unequal patterns of space-making, while at the same time opening spaces for urban renewal and resistance.

In a first step, the article traced how Cúcuta has become a strategic resource for VNSAs and a hub for illicit economies financing these groups’ activities. In Cúcuta, VNSAs traffic and sell illicit products, recruit personnel among vulnerable parts of the population, and launder assets. The border location and the intersection between conflict and the cross-border illicit economy has effects on urban governance and urban space: first, the city has become a space in which these VNSAs selectively seek to govern, to expand their grip over the population, and strengthen ties with local political elites. Second, as the example of informal settlements and housing struggles showed, illicit flows shaped the making of the city. This has been illustrated by zoning processes that demonstrate how illicit flows underpin (material) claims to the city both from below – as in the case of the gasoline smugglers demanding a place to live along smuggling routes by building informal settlements – and from above, with criminal and corrupt well-off city dwellers expanding and defending affluent neighbourhoods financed by laundered money.

What stands out in the urban condition of Cúcuta as a border city is that local civil society members evoke historically grown transnational bonds and challenge the established normative order of the Colombian nation-state. This is even more remarkable given the militarisation and concomitant criminalisation of social and community leadership. Inhabitants of the border city engage in activism from a perspective that interrogates the concept of national security,

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64 Online focus group with civil society representatives, 17 November 2020.

65 Remote interview with curator, Cúcuta, 5 July 2021.

66 See <https://juntosaparte.com/web/en/home/> (Accessed 17 July 2020).

67 Remote interview with curator Cúcuta, 5 July 2021.

emphasises cross-border solidarity, and points to the lack of citizen security at the country's periphery. This allows us to conceive of the border as a civic opportunity. Urban capabilities in the border city can be drivers for urban renewal and resistance, as the example of cultural and civil society interventions in the public space discussed in the final section of this article showed. By opening new spaces of participation, these interventions can advance a more open, inclusive, and egalitarian idea of society that may stimulate peaceful societal transformation. This focus on the border as a civic opportunity can contribute to revitalize an agenda of research and activism alike that focuses on borderland agency. As 'peripheries are spaces that frequently unsettle official logics' (Caldeira 2017: 7), thinking from the border city can thus facilitate the emergence of new approaches towards sovereignty, security, political participation, and peaceful co-existence by focusing on the border subjectivities that often take a more distanced stance – both in its geographic and its symbolic dimension – towards the nation-state.

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The author has no competing interests to declare.

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