

Cyprus: An election of ‘soft’ phenomena: apathy, incumbent punishment and far right consolidation

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INTRODUCTION

The 2019 European election in the Republic of Cyprus came three years after the last legislative elections of 2016, and one year after the presidential elections of 2018 that saw the right-wing governing party, DISY, and President Nicos Anastasiades renewing their mandate for another five years. In the surfeit of campaign news and electoral results that lie before us, one can observe a number of realignments in the patterns of political competition. Although each of them carries significance, their overall relevance in the island’s political evolution is certainly not analogous to a major transformation of domestic politics. Rather, a series of phenomena that can be called ‘soft’ have been witnessed, whereby apathy and far-right consolidation have become the new normal and a swing against the government has emerged, which, however, has not altered the political dynamics very significantly.

CAMPAIGN ISSUES: A LASTING CLEAVAGE STRUCTURE

Campaigning in the European elections is usually centred around national-level issues rather than EU-wide or even EU-relevant ones. Cyprus constitutes a clear example of this ethnocentric approach to the Union’s electoral process whereby political competition revolves chiefly around the Cyprus problem and the economy. This is a pattern evident since the first European elections of 2004 (Teperoglou, 2012) which continues to this day, in a way very similar to the rest of the continent.

The Cyprus problem both trampled the EU as an issue of public political debate and was incorporated into questions relevant to the EU. For example, the Turkish Cypriot academic Niazi Kizilyurek’s candidacy, on the left-wing AKEL’s ballot, was challenged by journalists and politicians who questioned his intentions about voting inside the European Parliament (EP) on ‘crucial issues’ of government and state policy such as direct trade between the EU and the internationally unrecognised TRNC (‘Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus’), in the island’s northern part.

Most polls showed that the Cyprus problem, the economy and to a lesser extent corruption were the main criteria declared by the public as driving the vote. These were also the most salient issues within public opinion, to which the media both responded and contributed with their own ethnocentric framing (Trimithiotis, 2019).

The crisis unfolded in various directions, such as discussions about the government's selling of the previously state-owned Cooperative Bank to one of the main private banks, and the handling of the transfer by the Finance Minister. Visible sleaze, compounded by the Left's allegations that Anastasiades and DISY were elitist, authoritarian and corrupt, also eroded the incumbent's profile. Issues of 'new politics' that go beyond the traditional cleavages in the country – such as women's rights within the EU or outside of it, LGBT rights issues, environmental protection, climate change, or urban planning – were marginal. Some additional issues were also already being addressed within the domain of the ethnic cleavage, through the everydayness of Cyprus problem politics.

The internal dynamics of parties determined their electoral strategy and, consequently, their ballot composition. The Left, inside which a clear pro-solution [to the Cyprus divided state] stance has been projected since about 2014, included for the first time a Turkish Cypriot on its ballot for a public political post in (or, on behalf of) the Republic of Cyprus. His nomination was both symbolic of the reunification struggles and practical, as it was the first time that AKEL ran an organised and extensive pre-electoral campaign in the northern part of the island, which on voting day evolved into help with the transportation and attendance of Turkish Cypriot voters at the electoral polls.

AKEL's move was at the same time electorally rational, as Kizilyurek's candidacy was intended to limit or reverse the party's 2 percentage points 'losses' to the reunification bi-communal lists of 2014, Jasmin and Drasy-Eylem. In the European elections of 2019, the Turkish Cypriot vote was expected to account for approximately between 2% and 4% of AKEL's overall vote share, depending on abstention. The higher the abstention among Greek Cypriots, the more determinative of the result the Turkish Cypriot vote, hence the more responsive to the Turkish Cypriot vote AKEL (and others) would likely be.

For right-wing DISY, the presence of the extreme right ELAM required candidates addressing ultranationalist, conservative and neo-fascist elements, but these had to be balanced with those reflecting liberal, open and bi-communal views. Its ballot thus reached a compromise between the popular, lower and middle-class tendencies of the Right, both religious and nationalist, and the cosmopolitan, capitalist strata and professional classes which are liberal and pro-European. Although DISY's strategy may have prevented worse damage, it was not enough to avert outflows towards either AKEL's bi-communal ballot or ELAM's outright hostility to reunification.

RESULTS AND INTERPRETATIONS: "SOFT" PHENOMENA

Six men were elected, two from the two main parties, AKEL and DISY, and one by the so-called in-between space, DIKO and EDEK. The four pillars of the pre-crisis party system in Cyprus entered the EP, but electoral shifts and evolving dynamics were evident (Table 1). In the immediate aftermath of the election, media coverage again revolved around the slogan 'Abstention was the winner'. In absolute votes abstention rose to 352,968 from 340,025 in 2014. A dramatic fall in the turnout rate happened

already in 2009, and then again in 2014, on the occasion of the second and third European elections in Cyprus. By today, apathy has been at stable levels, hence it is now all the more difficult to reverse – neither party-instigated polarisation, nor the growth of the far right have persuaded most voters to cast a ballot. Turkish Cypriot turnout was 6.93% (5,604 voters), approximately double that of 2014, largely because of Kirzilyurek’s nomination, but still very low. Increasing abstention rates and broader apathy are traits that have existed since before the early 2010s, and the onset of the economic crisis, thus cannot be exclusively linked to economic difficulties and their politicisation (see Charalambous, 2014).

Table 1 - Results of the 2019 European Parliament elections – Cyprus

PARTY	EP GROUP	VOTES (N)	VOTES (%)	SEATS	VOTES CHANGE FROM 2014 (%)	SEATS CHANGE FROM 2014
Democratic Rally (DISY)	EPP	81,539	29.2	2	-8.6	
Progressive Party of the Working People (AKEL)	GUE/NGL	77,241	27.5	2	+0.5	
Democratic Party (DIKO)	S&D	38,756	13.8	1	+3.0	
Social Democratic Movement - EDEK (EDEK)	S&D	29,715	10.6	1	N/A*	
National, Popular Front (ELAM)	NI	23,167	8.3		+5.6	
Democratic Line-up (DIPA)	NI	10,673	3.8			
Ecologists/Citizens' Movement	G-EFA/ALDE	9,232	3.3		N/A*	
Jasmin (Yasemi)	NI	4,786	1.7		N/A*	
Others		6	2.1			
Total		280,935	100	6		
Turnout (%)			45.0			
Legal threshold for obtaining MEPs (%)			1.8*			

*N/A because EDEK run on a joint ballot with the Ecologists in 2014; Citizens' Movement run alone; DIPA did not exist at the time; Yasemi's leader ran as an independent.
*The threshold by law is 1.8% but in practice for six seats (with Cyprus counting as a single constituency) it is 16.6%.

Nevertheless, some change has already happened. In clear contrast to the European elections of 2014, where the then newly elected President's honeymoon period (Anastasiades was elected in 2013) allowed the Right to avoid significant losses and present itself as a winner (Charalambous, Papageorgiou and Pegasiou, 2015), by 2019 dissatisfaction with the government had increased significantly. A considerable share of citizens with negative opinions about DISY shifted into abstention, so the party lost almost 9 percentage points (a total of around 16,000 votes). This may signal the beginning of the end of DISY's hegemony. However, considering the high electoral fluidity, this trend might be reversed or contained at the legislative elections in 2021. Compared to the vote shares of the parties participating in the EPP (European People's Party), DISY's losses still allow it a place approximately seven percentage points above its 'sister parties' EU average. Its result is thus not disastrous (at least in comparative terms), but its wave has receded, and its electoral future appears challenged.

The far right achieved a result establishing it as one of the five biggest parties in the Republic of Cyprus. Specifically, ELAM gathered 23,167 votes (8.3%), slightly higher than it polled at the Presidential elections of 2018, but more than three times (in real numbers) its 2014 European elections result. Although the Greek Cypriot far right did not manage to enter the EP, its real electoral strength now seems to lie between 6% and 8% of the vote. The days of discussing how to deter the rise of the extremists are now over; this is the period of their consolidation and mainstreaming.

The fluidity of political competition has also been clear for some time but the results, again, are not transformative. From Table 2, one can see that vote switching occurred between most political parties, but for the most part only between ideologically proximate parties or platforms; voters moved from one to another choice, largely based on at least one or more ideological or political convictions with a historical reflection in terms of either or both of traditional socio-economic issues and the Turkish/Greek ethnic cleavage.

Table 2 - Vote consolidation and vote switching at the 2019 Cyprus European elections (compared to the 2016 legislative elections)*

PARTY	VOTE CONSOLIDATION (\approx %)	MAIN INFLOWS FROM	MAIN OUTFLOWS TO
AKEL	89	Turkish Cypriots, centre-right liberals	EDEK and abstention
DISY	79	ELAM	ELAM, abstention
DIKO	72	Solidarity**	EDEK, DIPA
EDEK	80	DIKO, Ecologists/Citizens' Movement, AKEL	Very limited
DIPA	90	DISY, DIKO, AKEL, new voters, abstention	N/A
Ecologists/Citizens' Alliance	35/35	N/A	EDEK, Abstention
ELAM	80	Solidarity**, new voters, abstention, DISY	DISY

* Approximate figures, based on multiple exit polls.
** Solidarity is a centre-right, nationalist party, which ran on DIKO's ballot in 2019. Its leader, Eleni Theocharous came second and was not re-elected.

AKEL's candidate list, which included a Turkish Cypriot liberal academic (who was elected with more than 25,000 votes), attracted voters on the pro-reunification side within DISY or the broader centre-right space. The left also attracted a considerable number of Turkish Cypriots, as intended - around two thirds of those who voted. These two forces have increased AKEL's vote for the EP that, along with a return to the party of voters who had abstained in 2014, added to the Left around 8,000 voters compared with five years ago. Still, and although AKEL's vote consolidation has increased and is high, a number of voters choosing the party until 2009, before the effects of its experience in executive office (2008-2013), seem to have been lost forever - mostly, although not exclusively, to abstention.

DISY lost some of its former votes to its right competitor, the extremist ELAM, especially in the district of Famagusta, where material interests in tourism and construction that could be damaged by reunification tend to favour an explicitly hard-line policy on the Cyprus problem - and ultra-nationalism. The 'centrist', nationalist space emerged equally divided as before. Citizens' Alliance is exiting as a relevant actor, and DIKO's splinter, DIPA, is becoming a serious competitor. DIKO increased its share by 3%, partly due to the inclusion of Solidarity on its ballot. The social democratic EDEK attracted voters who were adamant on keeping ELAM out of the EP, many of whom came from the Ecologists/Citizens' Movement and, guided by polls, opted for EDEK to avoid casting a 'lost vote'.

The crisis years are not yet over in Cyprus, especially on the path towards the negotiated and official partition of the island (see Ioannou, 2019), but also concerning the public's response to the European elections. Various signs of economically driven political disaffection are there: increase in the left's vote consolidation, switches from the Right to the Far Right by ultra-nationalist lower- and middle-class supporters who have been negatively affected by state favours or policy, and the centrality of economic institutions in the campaign, such as co-ops and banks.

In most respects, the election signalled the continuation of developments that had appeared with the European elections of 2009 and 2014 or the legislative elections of 2016; this year's electoral contest consolidated pre-existing tendencies inside Cypriot society rather than generating phenomena that are entirely new in their own right.

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