

CYPRUS



Rising discontent with the EU, the Rise of the Right and the 2024 European Parliament Elections in Cyprus

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Abstract

The objective of this chapter is to discuss the causes of rising discontent in Cyprus and assess the political outcomes. Within this framework we briefly evaluate how the EU has dealt with various crises in the last few years. Perceptions in Cyprus about the EU have changed over time. In the 9 June European elections, a member of the extreme right-wing party, National People's Front (Ethniko Laiko Metopo, ELAM), was elected for the first time to the European Parliament. Understanding the circumstances in Cyprus that have gradually led to disillusionment with the national political system and the EU is essential to making sense of these developments.

Keywords: *Cyprus; extreme right; economic crisis; voter disillusionment; European elections*

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Theophanous, Andreas & Varda, Mary. (2024). "Rising discontent with the EU, the Rise of the Right and the 2024 European Parliament Elections in Cyprus." In: *2024 EP Elections under the Shadow of Rising Populism*. (eds). Gilles Ivaldi and Emilia Zankina. European Center for Populism Studies (ECPS. October 22, 2024. <https://doi.org/10.55271/rp0065>



Introduction

Undoubtedly, the EU currently faces multiple challenges. In addition to Euroscepticism, we are also faced with populism, which at times may lead to dangerous outcomes (Katsambekis, 2014). Yet, despite much criticism on multiple themes, the EU remains one of, if not the most desirable places in the world to live. The objective of this chapter is to discuss the causes of rising discontent in Cyprus and the political outcomes. Within this framework we briefly refer to how the EU dealt with some of the crises in the last few years.

Perceptions of the EU in Cyprus have changed over time. It is essential to understand the circumstances in this island state that have gradually led to disillusionment with the Cypriot political system and the EU. This disillusionment is one of the reasons that has led to the rise of populist trends across all Cypriot parties. Through recourse to populism, parties across the political spectrum have attempted to get closer to voters. For the purposes of this chapter, we will be focusing essentially on the case of rising right-wing rhetoric.

When Cyprus applied for membership in the EU on 4 July 1990, there were very high expectations. The principal perception was that the EU institutions and value system would eventually contribute to the termination of the occupation of the northern part of Cyprus and to a just solution to the problem. At the same time, there were high expectations regarding socioeconomic modernization and a new era. According to polls taken during the accession negotiations, Cyprus had the most favourable attitude towards the EU.

Eventually, these perceptions gradually changed, with the initial optimism fading (Katsourides, 2014). Indeed, retrospectively, Cypriots now view their initial perceptions as illusions. There were some specific issues which led to these changes. During the negotiations to resolve the Cyprus problem, which coincided with the period leading to accession, pressures were exerted on the Greek Cypriot side by the United Nations (UN), the United States and the United Kingdom, the former colonial power on the island. The EU more or less followed their lead. When Professor Shlomo Avineri of the University of Jerusalem and Ex-Director General of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Israel read the UN's Annan Plan, he noted that it amounted to 'the favourite occupation of the EU and the UN' (Avineri, 2004). Yet, the Greek Cypriots were demonized for rejecting this plan.

It is instructive to compare and contrast the EU stance towards Russia and Turkey. Although by definition each case is unique, there are also some common characteristics. In both cases, there have been violations of international law. When Russia invaded Ukraine on 24 February 2022, there was a strong reaction on the part of the West. As Theophanous (2023: 205) notes: ‘The response of the EU was firm and punitive’. Russia soon became the most sanctioned country in the world, while Ukraine has received massive economic and military aid. ‘In the case of Cyprus, however’, Theophanous further reminds us, ‘Turkey has been tolerated and accommodated. This is because Russia is considered a foe, while Turkey is perceived as a strategic partner’ (Ibid.).

In the case of Cyprus, the West (including the EU) has more or less adjusted to the *fait accompli* created by Turkey’s occupation of 37% of the territory of Cyprus. The West (including the EU) tolerates this occupation and its entailing colonization and Islamization, the usurpation of Greek Cypriot properties in the north, as well as its systematic violations of the Cypriot exclusive economic zone (EEZ) by Turkey. In addition, the EU has not made economic aid to the Turkish Cypriots conditional, which would incentivize co-operation. Understandably, Greek Cypriots are not pleased with these policies and practices. As a result, the way the EU is perceived has changed in the eyes of most Cypriots.

When Cyprus faced a significant economic crisis in 2013, the EU’s treatment was rather punitive and irrational. There is no doubt that there was a need for a major restructuring of the Cypriot economy. However, the way it was promoted unnecessarily entailed a huge socioeconomic cost.

These developments, coupled with the ongoing economic turmoil caused by rising inflation, have made Cypriot voters susceptible to populist rhetoric. These conditions made the far-right and anti-systemic rhetoric of the National People’s Front (Ethniko Laiko Metopo, ELAM) appear as a viable way out of the crises for some voters. Others turn to ELAM as a form of protest against the current political system (Knews Kathimerini, 2023). This is demonstrated through ELAM’s electoral success at the 2024 European elections, where the party, which was founded in 2008, managed to secure its first seat in the European Parliament.



The historical context of right-wing politics in Cyprus

Right-wing politics in Cyprus has a long and complex history, deeply intertwined with the island's political and social developments (Charalambous, 2018). The roots of right-wing ideology can be traced back to the early twentieth century, during the struggle against British colonial rule and the pursuit of enosis (union with Greece). This period saw the rise of nationalist sentiments and the establishment of right-wing political organizations such as the National Organization of Cypriot Fighters (EOKA), which played a significant role in the anti-colonial movement and Cyprus' subsequent independence from Britain in 1960.

Following independence, right-wing politics continued to be influential. This trend persisted after the Turkish invasion of 1974 as well. In 1976 the Democratic Rally (DISY) was founded and gradually emerged as a major political force. It has long advocated a market-oriented economy, closer ties with the West and a pragmatic stance on the Cyprus issue. Over time, however, the political landscape began to shift, particularly in the wake of the 2008 global financial crisis and the Eurozone crisis that followed. These economic challenges, which entailed high unemployment rates, austerity measures and corruption, fuelled public discontent and created fertile ground for the resurgence of far-right rhetoric (Katsourides, 2014).

Most Cypriots believe that the EU did not treat Cyprus rationally and with solidarity when the country found itself in a difficult economic condition in 2013. The Cypriot economic crisis had both endogenous and exogenous causes. Cyprus' treatment by the Troika – the European Commission, the European Central Bank (ECB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) – was harsh and punitive. Several politicians and analysts indicated that Cyprus was used as a guinea pig (Žižek, 2014). Many Cypriots feel that it is doubtful whether the Troika would have treated a Catholic or a Protestant country in the same way as Cyprus and Greece were treated. In the process the Cypriot banking system was in essence destroyed. Currently, the banking system essentially belongs to foreign capital. Furthermore, the cost of services has increased while quality has declined. Cyprus Airways closed down, with foreign carriers taking over its routes. Inequality grew and the Cypriot economic structure changed. Despite the Troika, Cyprus recovered, albeit at a high socioeconomic cost (Theophanous, 2018). Cypriots also feel that the EU is currently not exhibiting adequate solidarity in relation to the immigration crisis. Cyprus is the top EU country in terms of per capita asylum applications.

Inevitably, these issues have led to Euroscepticism and discontent concerning the EU. At the same time, critics feel that the mainstream political parties have not successfully addressed the significant challenges Cyprus faces. Discontent with the Cypriot political system has been growing, given that there have been serious incidents of corruption on several occasions, and the country has failed to cope successfully with multiple challenges.

Considering all these factors, it is hardly surprising that voter turnout has declined as more and more Cypriots disengage from politics. At the same time, according to polls and actual election results, ELAM's public support has been growing. It could be said that many of those who support it are expressing a protest on the one hand and a warning on the other. These voters are part of a broader trend of far-right populism gaining traction across Europe, driven by economic insecurities, cultural anxieties and disillusionment with mainstream politics. Despite its radical positions, ELAM has managed to integrate into the political mainstream to some extent, collaborating with other parties on specific issues while maintaining its distinct far-right identity. For example, Annita Demetriou (DISY), the president of Cyprus' parliament, was elected thanks to the votes of the MPs of ELAM and another small centrist party, Democratic Alignment (DiPa), who voted with her party. The historical presence of right-wing politics in Cyprus and the contemporary rise of ELAM illustrate the dynamic and evolving nature of political ideologies on the island, shaped by historical legacies and current sociopolitical challenges.

The political context of the 2024 European Parliament elections

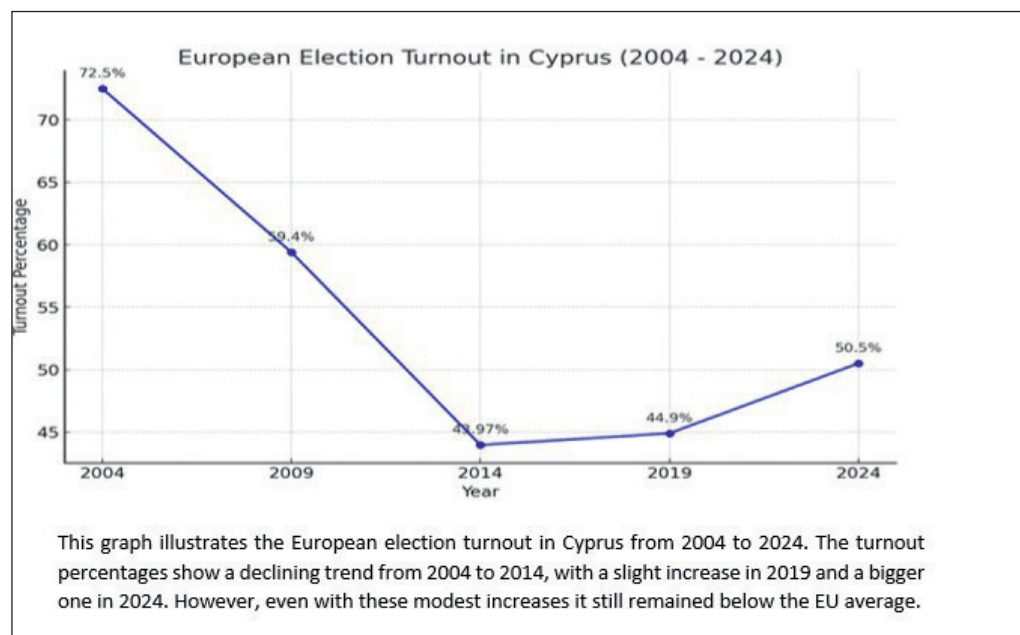
When a country faces occupation, existential issues, difficult socioeconomic conditions, corruption, high immigration flows and identity issues and the political system cannot respond adequately, extreme tendencies at some point become inevitable. Even before the European parliamentary election results were announced, there was a widespread belief that the political system required much improvement. Thus, the rise of right-wing rhetoric, especially in the case of Cyprus, did not come as a surprise, and its representation in the European Parliament was expected.

Furthermore, even though two elections were held concurrently on 9 June 2024 – for the European Parliament and local government – the voter turnout was dismally low at 50.5% (Philenews, 2024). The low turnout rates indicate the



disillusionment of the Cypriot electorate towards both national and European politics. It is worth noting that the Cypriot electorate has never demonstrated particularly high levels of engagement with European politics, which has fallen even lower since the Eurozone crisis in 2013 (see Figure 1). As mentioned earlier, its significant social impact on Cyprus seemed to alter citizens' views towards the EU during this period (Katsourides, 2013).

Figure 1. European election turnout in Cyprus (2004-2024)



Source: prepared by the authors who utilized published data of the European election results (European Parliament, 2024)

In recent years, voters have repeatedly warned the political system in various ways, but the response has not been satisfactory. As mentioned earlier, the EU's stance on several issues has been inadequate, requiring member states to pick up the slack in many instances, such as on the issue of asylum seekers. Even before the 2024 elections, the political system and the three major political parties – DISY, the Democratic Party (DIKO) and the Progressive Party of Working People (AKEL) – faced crisis and our brief overview shows there were already plenty of warning signs (Theophanous, 2024a; Theophanous, 2024b; Theophanous, 2024c). Citizens also gave politicians many warnings and opportunities to change course. Because they did not see any real change, their messages were much stronger at the 9 June elections. It would not be an exaggeration to describe the results (the election of an extreme right-wing candidate and an independent candidate with no prior political experience) as a political earthquake.

It should be noted that, firstly, during the European election campaign, there was not much discussion on the challenges facing the EU or the candidates' positions. Most notably, Fidias Panayiotou, the independent candidate with no background in politics or social issues, made it clear in his pre-election campaign that he had yet to formulate any political opinions on matters such as the Cyprus question or the role of the EU. Nor was there any discussion of the role of Cyprus in the European project (Theophanous, 2024e). Secondly, a vital objective of the local government reform preceding the June elections was to reduce the cost of running it. However, fears have already been expressed that there will probably be an increase in costs. This has further deepened the grievances of the Cypriot electorate with the current political system and the parties responsible for this reform. The disillusionment of the electorate and their preference for 'apolitical politics' was also evident in the latest presidential elections in Cyprus, where the incumbent president, Nikos Christodoulides, won even though he focused more on his public image than on policies to address fundamental issues. This strategy proved highly successful as it enabled him to stand apart from the established political parties of the island, which Cypriot citizens have long accused of corruption (Triga et al., 2023).

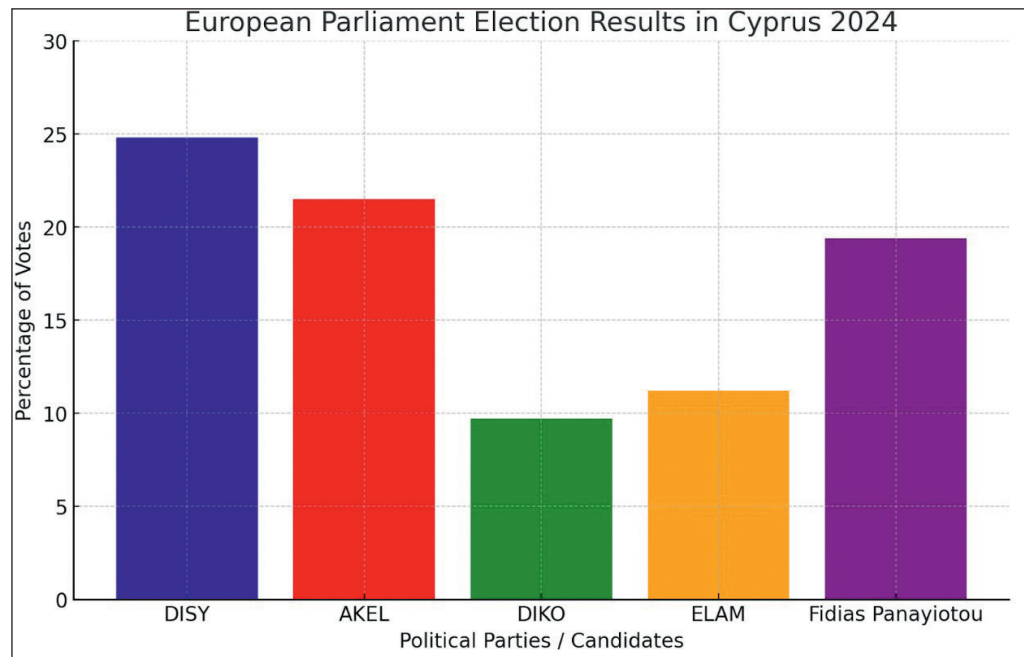
The results of the 2024 European elections

It is also important to assess the election results, even if only briefly, concerning the performance of the political parties. A brief introduction of the main political parties of Cyprus – DISY, DIKO and AKEL – is thus necessary. DISY is a Christian Democratic party with a liberal–conservative ideology, while DIKO is a nationalist–centrist political party, and AKEL is Cyprus' communist party.

In June, DISY recorded its lowest percentage vote share ever (24.8%). Despite the decline in support, it was the party that paid the smallest price. Furthermore, while it may not have had satisfactory results in the local government elections, retaining the two seats in the European Parliament was a tremendous boon.



Figure 2. European Parliament election results in Cyprus (2024)



Source: prepared by the authors who have utilized the published data of the 2024 European Elections (Ministry of the Interior, 2024)

After losing three presidential elections and considering the difficult socioeconomic conditions, one would have expected AKEL to recover and present itself as a leading force. This did not happen. Despite the relatively positive performance in the local government elections, the result for the European elections (21.5%) and the loss of one seat constitute a major defeat for the party. Obviously, the causes of this result run deeper than the election campaign. AKEL's leadership should, among other things, ask itself why citizens expressed their disdain for the current state of political affairs by supporting a candidate without a political background and concrete policy proposals, among other candidates, rather than the largest opposition party.

Inevitably, its showing (9.7% of the vote) was also a defeat for DIKO, even though it retained its seat in the European Parliament. The fact that the party's share fell below 10% while ELAM surpassed it which contains both substantive and symbolic messages. We should recall that one of DIKO's campaign slogans was 'vote DIKO for effective governance'. Obviously, the electorate did not respond. Nor is it a coincidence that the other two parties that supported President Nicos Christodoulides also saw their electoral strength decline.

During the election campaign, one of the top priorities of almost all parties was the need to contain ELAM. Nevertheless, ELAM continued to grow, securing a

double-digit share of the vote (11.2%), surpassing DIKO and securing one EP seat. The political system should also ask itself what would have happened to ELAM's percentage if not for the candidacy of the independent, Fidias Panayiotou, who gained 19.4% of the votes.

One of the most important advantages of ELAM is its ability to resonate strongly with younger voters, something the traditional parties have been struggling to do. Indeed, ELAM's voter base is disproportionately made up of young male voters (Knews Kathimerini, 2023). ELAM's strength, much like Fidias Panayiotou's, came from its ability to mobilize younger voters who failed to show up in large numbers in previous elections. However, unlike ELAM, Panayiotou did not present any specific policy positions. From this observation, we can see how Cyprus' political system has cultivated an apolitical mentality, fostering a climate for the advent and strengthening of populism (Theophanous, 2024d). Panayiotou took advantage of this state of affairs – the disdain and disappointment of thousands of citizens, especially young people – to secure a seat in the European Parliament.

Obviously, there is an urgent need to redefine the political system and public life in Cyprus. The parties and the political system should take stock of recent developments and look for new ideas, novel approaches and fresh faces. Cyprus and its people are facing serious challenges. It is crucial to get politics back on track.

The National People's Front's appeal and political trajectory

As touched on above, ELAM was founded in 2008 as the Cypriot sister party of the Golden Dawn, a neo-Nazi party in Greece. The group that founded the party sought to register it under the same name (Golden Dawn), but the authorities denied this request (Charalambous and Christoforou, 2018; Katsourides, 2013). ELAM, however, passed through a transitional period, during which it shaped a new public face in the political landscape, escaping from the shadow of Golden Dawn. What prompted and necessitated this change was the fact that Golden Dawn and its leaders were convicted and imprisoned for operating a criminal organization that was tied to murder and criminal violence. In addition, in an attempt to become accepted as part of the Cypriot political system and cast off its image as an extremist organization, ELAM proceeded to distance itself from other extreme European right-wing parties and organizations – such as the National



Democratic Party (NPD) in Germany, Forza Nuova in Italy, and the Movement Against Illegal Immigration (DPNI) in Russia – with which they had previously advertised their close ties. ELAM, for example, ensured that links to the websites of the above European parties were deleted from its website. In addition, it removed all documents and text it shared with the Golden Dawn website.

ELAM's political positions have relied on principles and policies adopted by both parties on the left and right. Their practices were determined by both ideological and tactical motives. In its early steps, it appeared increasingly difficult for ELAM to make a breakthrough in the Cypriot political scene as its program transcended mainstream party politics. In addition to the Cyprus problem, the advent of the economic crisis of 2011 and the austerity measures imposed by the Troika in 2013, along with the severe budget cuts, the 'haircut' uninsured depositors had to take on balances above €100,000, as well as political corruption, gave ELAM the opportunity to establish itself as a legitimate political force. It could do so because, unlike the traditional parties deemed responsible for such crises, ELAM was a novel political force untarnished by corruption at the time. It could thus enter the political scene as the new political force that would hold traditional parties accountable.

All of ELAM's policies have the underlying principle of protecting the Greek Cypriots. ELAM narrowly identifies the issues to be addressed by and for the Greek Cypriots (mostly the Turkish occupation of the northern part of Cyprus, the neoliberal policies of the EU and illegal immigration). Identifying explicit threats against the interests of the Greek Cypriots enables ELAM to propose clear solutions (regardless of whether they are pragmatic or not). This simplicity of ELAM's discourse seems to appeal to many voters. The success of this discourse is reflected in the gradual and steady rise in ELAM's votes from 663 votes in the 2009 European Parliament elections to 4.056 in the Cyprus parliamentary elections of 2011, 13.040 in 2016 and 24.255 in May 2021, becoming the fourth largest party on the island. During the 2024 European Parliament elections, ELAM secured its first seat in the European Parliament with 41.215 votes (Cyprus Mail, 2024). Currently, ELAM is the third-largest party on the island.

ELAM promotes a narrative emphasizing support for families, youth, vulnerable populations, low-income workers, and pensioners, proposing measures to aid these groups (Chatzistylianou, 2019). Within this framework, it often contrasts this support with the assistance given to Turkish Cypriots, migrants and asylum seekers,

advocating for policies favouring native Greeks.

Although ELAM criticizes other political parties as corrupt and accountable for the country's problems, its anti-establishment stance becomes ambiguous following its entry into the House of Representatives in 2016. It has co-operated with the ruling Democratic Rally to pass budgets and, as mentioned, elect the president of the parliament in 2021. In a political landscape where mainstream parties, including DISY, adopt anti-immigration stances, ELAM distinguishes itself as the authentic representative of these views.

ELAM supports left-wing economic policies aimed at wealth redistribution and increased state intervention in market regulation. It advocates for social protection measures, reduced business taxes in rural areas, incentives for technology and innovation, and various forms of business support.

The economic crisis which started in 2008 and the COVID-19 pandemic provided ELAM with opportunities to develop its strategy, focusing on aiding those in need while distinguishing between natives and non-natives. The party's approach involves reallocating state aid from migrants and asylum seekers to native Greeks, thereby positioning itself as a champion of vulnerable groups (Charalambous & Christoforou, 2018). This strategy helped ELAM differentiate itself from other populist parties, as it capitalized on the public's discontent with systemic parties blamed for the crises, allowing ELAM to emerge as a perceived saviour.

Concluding remarks

The rise of right-wing rhetoric in Cyprus, exemplified by the success of ELAM, reflects broader regional and global trends of populist movements. The fact that the EU has been unable to respond effectively to pressing issues plaguing the Union (immigration and economic crises as well as the war in Ukraine) allowed for the rampant spread of Euroscepticism. Cypriot citizens have an additional reason for their Eurosceptic attitude as their expectations of the EU regarding the Cyprus problem have not been met. Inevitably, many citizens adopted the Eurosceptic stance of ELAM. In addition, the failure of the Cypriot political system and the mainstream parties to effectively address issues has been a significant factor in the rise of ELAM.

This article has traced the historical roots and contemporary dynamics of right-



wing politics in Cyprus, highlighting that the support for such ideologies is deeply embedded in the country's political history. Indeed, it can even be argued that if the extreme right were not associated with the disaster of 1974, perhaps its support would have been even higher. The recent electoral success of ELAM underscores the urgent need for the political system to address the underlying causes of this trend and redefine its approach to public life and governance. Likewise, it is essential to assess how this climate of discontent can be ameliorated both in the EU as a whole and in the member states.

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