Organizational continuity and electoral endurance: The Communist party of Cyprus

Antonis A. Ellinas, University of Cyprus
Yiannos Katsourides, University of Cyprus

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Abstract

This article makes a contribution to the understanding of party organization by examining one the most successful West European communist parties, the Communist Party of Cyprus (AKEL). Defying the downward trend of its counterparts and the external shock of Soviet collapse, the AKEL has managed to sustain the support of nearly a third of the electorate. Using original archival evidence and interview data, the article attributes the electoral endurance of the AKEL to organizational continuity. Since its founding, the party has built a robust mass party structure, with an extensive network of auxiliary organizations and strong centralizing mechanisms. During the crisis of the late 1980s, the party kept the basic features of this organizational model intact refusing to dismantle its Leninist organizational infrastructure. Organizational continuity has helped the AKEL sustain its electoral strength by signaling its ideological consistency. Organizational continuity might also account for the relative persistence of other communist parties in Western Europe.

Introduction

Although the internal life of political parties has been the focus of scholarly attention for nearly a century (Ostrogorski 1902; Michels, 1915), we still know little about how the machinery of political parties affects “dropping into boxes pieces of paper bearing the names of candidates” (Bryce 1902: xl). For those inclined to treat “each party as though it were a single person” (Downs 1957: 26), this limited understanding has never been a substantial problem. Much like neorealists have treated states (e.g. Waltz 1979), some
students of modern democratic politics have downplayed the internal workings of political parties and focused instead on systemic determinants of their trajectory. The difficulty of linking intraparty life with political outcomes has been much more troubling for those looking “inside” political parties. Once acknowledging that political parties are not monoliths moving in the competitive space, it becomes necessary to identify those endogenous factors affecting their performance. The establishment of this critical link between intraparty life and electoral performance has proven difficult. In part this is because of the intricacy of internal party dynamics, which complicates attempts to distill those factors affecting party performance. Various efforts to understand parties from within have had trouble disaggregating factors like leadership charisma, programmatic positioning and organizational machinery. The difficulty of identifying the net causal effect of intraparty life is also due to the obstacles that party organizations raise to praying outsiders. Access to reliable information about the internal life of political parties is difficult, especially for parties that are thought to be on the fringes of the political spectrum.

This article uses original data from one of the most successful communist party in Europe, the Communist Party of Cyprus (AKEL), to examine how intraorganizational factors have enabled the party to sustain its electoral base. Enjoying the constant electoral support of a third of the electorate, the AKEL has managed to defy the systemic factors that led to the crisis of West European communism. Party critics and supporters alike largely attribute the persistence of party strength to its organizational machinery. Yet, this claim is yet to be put to systematic empirical scrutiny. Relying on elite interviews and party archives, this article analyzes the organizational capacity of the Cypriot communist party to account for its electoral endurance. It highlights the factors that led to the initial organizational set
up of the party and documents the continuity of its basic Leninist organizational features. The article emphasizes three distinct features: the basic organizational structure of the AKEL, its dense network of auxiliary organizations and the application of democratic centralism. Whereas many of its West European counterparts dismantled their Leninist organizational matrix as part of their ideological and strategic repositioning in the competitive space, the AKEL chose to sustain its organizational structure, maintain its links with organized labor and hold on to its controversial centralizing mechanisms. The main argument is that this organizational continuity helped the party successfully absorb the external shocks and effectively adjust to changing political conditions.

There is now a voluminous literature “looking within” parties to understand how they behave in the political environment. The first section of the article engages with this literature emphasizing its major findings and pointing to potential problems in linking party organization and electoral performance. The second part focuses on the AKEL providing some background and documenting the electoral performance of the party and its West European peers, before examining various alternative explanations for the electoral persistence of the AKEL. The third section uses original organizational data and relies on interviews with members of the party secretariat to examine the effects of party organization on the AKEL’s performance. The last section concludes with a synopsis of the findings and a discussion about the merits of organizational stability during political crises. The discussion extends the findings from the study of the AKEL to other cases to draw some generalizable conclusions about the importance of organizational continuity.

**Party organization**
While interest in the organization of political parties is not new, it took many years before political scientists started treating political parties in the same way Ostrogorski (1902) and Michels (1915) did – as units of analysis that merit attention in their own right. In the past decades interest in the internal workings of political parties has given rise to a mushrooming literature. At one level this literature tends to treat parties as dependent variables seeking to understand how their environments shape their organizational evolution. Some of the most notable contributions in this literature have documented the internal evolution of party organizations in line with broader sociopolitical changes. According to this logic, the traditional mass party is being transformed into the “electoral-professional” (Panebianco 1988) or to the “cartel party” (Katz and Mair 1995). Whether treating the party as a single unit or disaggregating it into its constituent parts (e.g. Katz and Mair 1994: 4) this literature sought to understand how parties are adapting to their environments, and ultimately, how intraparty changes affect the quality of representative democracy.

At a different level this new literature “treats parties not simply as dependent variables, the hapless victims of their economic or demographic environments, but also as independent variables, the active shapers of their own fates” (Berman 1997: 102). At the center of this scholarly work is an attempt to demonstrate that intraparty factors have a net causal effect on the electoral performance of political parties. For some works this effect is largely indirect: it is the residual of what environmental factors cannot explain. One of the most known applications of this approach deals with socialist parties arguing that the failure of these parties to take up optimal positions in the competitive space is due to intraparty factors (Kitschelt 1994). This approach has found considerable resonance among students of “radical right” parties as well. The “intricacies of organizing a new party” and “impediments to organizational consolidation” (Kitschelt with McGann 1995: 278–279)
have been thought to affect the capacity of these parties to capitalize on the political opportunities available in the electoral market. Cross-national studies have shown that organizational characteristics are important in explaining why radical right parties succeed in some settings but fail in others (e.g. Lubbers 2002; Carter 2005).

Some scholarly work is even more ambitious trying to find a direct causal link between party organization and performance (e.g. Janda 1983). Going beyond the probabilistic analysis of multiple cases, this work shows that internal party factors can go a long way to explain variation in electoral performance. Facing the same external environment, parties with a similar ideological profile are shown to have different fates. In the case of the Belgian radical right, for example, organizational strength can account for the divergent trajectories of successful Flemish radicals and failed Wallonian extremists (Art 2008). And in the case of East European communist parties, the accumulation of certain resources and organizational transformation allowed some of these parties to survive the collapse of communism and the transition to electorally competitive systems (Grzymala-Busse 2002).

Despite these noteworthy scholarly contributions, the electoral effects of party organization continue to be one of the most important lacunae in the study of parties. There are a number of reasons for this. First, there is little consensus on the specific factors affecting party behavior and performance. Efforts to open the “black box” of intraparty life stumble on the multiplicity of potential explanatory variables. The strength of party organization has become associated with leadership charisma, intraparty coalitions, centralizing mechanisms, recruitment patterns, membership base, organizational coherence, factional tendencies, etc. At any given time some of these factors co-vary making it difficult to distill those causal mechanisms affecting party
performance. Second, some of the boldest claims about the importance of party organization are based on scant evidence. Unable to penetrate the thick walls of secrecy that parties raise to avoid curious intruders (Mudde 2007), scholarship on party organization has mostly relied on the coding or synthesis of secondary sources (some exceptions include Kitschelt 1989; Grzymala-Busse 2002; Art 2011). Recognizing the drawbacks of this research, Herbert Kitschelt points out the need for “more precise empirical research” and suggests undertaking “carefully selected and detailed case studies” (2007: 1997).

Attempts to examine the electoral effects of party organization have paid little attention to West European communist parties. This is surprising given the importance that Leninist parties themselves have ascribed to organizational principles (Keith 2010: 4) and given the overall attention this party family has received. On account of the traditional communist emphasis on “democratic centralist” organizational practices (Waller 1981), one would have expected that West European communist parties would be at the center of scholarly efforts to assess organizational effects. After all, some of the organizational characteristics of West European communist parties – e.g. the centralization of authority, the enforcement of strict discipline and the binding character of top-level decisions – have been associated with the success of other party families, such as the radical right.¹ Yet, despite the obvious relevance of communist organizational practices to the understanding of organizational effects, scholarly spotlights have mostly focused on East, rather than West European communist parties (e.g. Ishiyama 2001; Grzymala-Busse 2002).

The scant attention paid to communist party organization is less surprising if looked through the prism of the electoral trajectory of West European communism. Even before

¹ A number of scholars have pointed out, for example, that the organization of the French National Front is modeled after the Communist Party (e.g. Marcus 1995; Simmons 1996; Mayer 1998).
the collapse of the USSR, close observers of West European communism argued that it had “entered a phase of irreversible historical decline and is doomed to disappear” (Lazar 1988: 243). West European communist parties have been losing their voter and membership base, unable to cope with the drastic changes brought about in the sociopolitical environment. The trend has been nearly universal as well as intense, thereby suggesting the importance of systemic factors in accounting for the electoral evolution of these parties. Even the most potent communist political organizations in Western Europe, like the French or the Italian communist parties, have been unable to deflect the pressures that led to their marginality. The systemic nature of the pressures facing West European communism has limited the scope for analyses focusing on the organization of these parties. The organizational tools these parties had at their disposal seemed insufficient to counter the electoral consequences of broader sociopolitical developments, and hence unworthy of systematic empirical inquiry.

This is what makes the case of AKEL so important for the understanding of intraparty facilitators of electoral persistence. A case “where systematic demand and supply theories predict different level of electoral success than what is empirically observed” (Kitschelt 2007: 1197), the Communist party of Cyprus offers an opportunity to examine intraparty factors that allowed it to defy pan-European trends.

**AKEL in the West European communist universe**

To understand the significance of studying the AKEL from “within” it is important to fully appreciate its exceptional electoral standing in the West European communist universe. This standing was most evident after the events of the late 1980s, when most communist parties witnessed the collapse of their electoral standing and faced the threat of being eliminated from the electoral map. The aftermath of the massive changes brought
about by the collapse of Soviet communism triggered an enormous discussion among academics and politicians with some predicting that the vanishing of the orthodox Left would not be a transitional phenomenon (Kitschelt 1992: 41). The electoral collapse of West European communism was evident at the parliamentary level, with communist parties virtually disappearing as electorally successful organisations (March and Mudde 2005: 42). Scholars studying communist parties soon after the cataclysmic events of the late 1980s also noted that these prime examples of organizational robustness were witnessing shrinkage of their membership base both in absolute number and as a percentage of the electorate (Katz and Mair 1992: 335). The waning electoral fortunes of these parties seemingly came about despite their different responses to the exogenous shock. Whether they remained loyal communists like the Greeks or reformed themselves into Leftist democrats like the Italians or the Finish (March and Mudde 2005), West European communists had a similar fate (Graph 1).

The sharp decline of communist parties in West European elections contrasts with the electoral performance of the AKEL. Notwithstanding the systemic pressures to communist electorates across Western Europe, Cypriot communists have managed to
sustain their voter share presenting a seminal exception that merits explanation (Table 1). The outstanding trajectory of the Cypriot communist party has not escaped scholarly attention (e.g. Bell 1993: 9-10) but attempts to explain the exceptional standing of the AKEL in the West European communist universe are rare. Although the party was originally founded in 1926 as the Communist Party of Cyprus, there is only a single monograph on the AKEL (Adams 1971). Recently the party has attracted more attention, mostly by students of political parties who consider it “one of the most unusual and interesting parties in Europe’ (Dunphy and Bale 2007: 129; see also Panayiotou 2006; Charalambous 2007; Katsourides 2012).

Table 1: AKEL’s electoral performance in parliamentary elections, 1981-2011

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Election Year*</th>
<th>Votes</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Seats</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>95,364</td>
<td>32.77</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>87,628</td>
<td>27.43</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>104,771</td>
<td>30.63</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>121,958</td>
<td>33.00</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>142,648</td>
<td>34.71</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>131,066</td>
<td>31.13</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>132,163</td>
<td>32.67</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Ministry of Interior
Note: *elections prior to 1981 were held under a majoritarian electoral system that encouraged coalition building, thereby making comparisons invalid.

The electoral persistence of the AKEL has been attributed to a number of factors. Some of these relate to the particularities of the Cypriot political system. One such particularity is obviously the size of the country. It has been pointed out, for example, that the “face-to-face” political culture of the island has contributed to the AKEL’s success (Dunphy and Bale 2007: 288). Upon closer look, however, this “coziness” of the political culture
cannot sufficiently explain communist persistence to systemic shocks. To the extent that the AKEL benefits from this culture it is only because it has a complex organizational structure that allows it to directly communicate with even the most remote communist constituencies.²

Another particularity of Cyprus – the bicomunal conflict that led to the de facto division of the island after the 1974 Turkish invasion – must also be taken into account in efforts to understand the AKEL’s persistence. The “Cyprus problem” has divided the Left in a way that has arguably limited the capacity of the more hard-line Socialists and the Greens to make electoral inroads similar to those that European socialist and new Left parties made into communist constituencies. That being said, this distortion that the Cyprus problem created in political competition has been limited in more recent years, as materialist issues have become just as important as “the national issue” in political discourse.³ This “normalization” of the competitive space is not only due to the economic crisis, which brought to the surface the structural problems of the Cyprus economy, but it is also due to the overwhelming rejection in 2004 of the UN-sponsored plan to reunify the island, which has since shelved the possibility of an immediate solution to the problem. That the AKEL has sustained its electoral support despite these developments limits the explanatory utility of accounts focusing on the particularities of the Cypriot political system. The capacity of the AKEL to sustain its electoral standing is even more striking when one takes into account the introduction of proportional representation with a relatively low 1.8%-threshold in 1996 and the subsequent fragmentation of the party system brought about by the parliamentary representation of the Greens and the hard-right European Party.

² Interview with Christos Alekou, 17 May 2012, Nicosia.
³ A poll shows that 54% of those asked think that the “economy” should be the top priority of the next president compared to 25% who mentioned the Cyprus problem. «Στον πάτο πολιτικοί και τράπεζες», 13 July 2012, StockWatch; last accessed on 1 August 2012 from http://www.stockwatch.com.cy/nqcontent.cfm?a_name=news_view&ann_id=155804.
A third alternative explanation for the electoral success of the AKEL goes beyond the particularities of the Cypriot political system and focuses on party positioning in the competitive space. Unlike most communist parties in Western Europe, the AKEL demonstrated early on a pragmatic approach to socialism and government. While “being led from the Marxist – Leninist worldview” (AKEL 2011a: 4), the party has accepted some basic features of market democracy such as private ownership and multiparty competition. Although the ideological goal of the party is to establish “social ownership” of the means of production and while the AKEL annually celebrates the 1917 October Revolution, Cypriot communists recognize – in part, because of the Cyprus problem – that the conditions are not ripe for a revolutionary transition to socialism (AKEL 1994b: 4--14). Awaiting the establishment of socialism, the AKEL supported or participated early enough in government coalitions resisting the allergic reaction of most of its counterparts to coalition building. Throughout time the party has also demonstrated considerable programmatic adaptability (Charalambous 2007) accepting in 1995 the necessity of European Union entry. In more recent years, it has backed pay freezes, the targeting of social spending and the privatization of some state-owned enterprises. Overall it can be argued, then, that the persistence of the party is due to its effective maneuvering in the competitive space rather than other party-specific factors, like its organization. While acknowledging the role of the AKEL’s strategic choices, this article treats party maneuvering as the outcome of deeper intraparty dynamics. In line with a notable line of theorizing on this topic (e.g. Michels 1915; Kitschelt 1989; 1994; Grzymala-Busse 2002), the article focuses on the organizational capacity of the AKEL, showing how its Leninist machinery has enabled it to effectively respond to changing environmental stimuli. This was particularly evident during the late 1980s and early 1990s – a critical juncture for the party – when its organizational machinery was set in motion to ensure its endurance.
The organizational evolution of the AKEL

To understand the organizational factors that have helped sustain the AKEL’s electoral standing it is important to analyze the organizational infrastructure of the party since its founding and to appreciate the continuity in its organizational set up. The remainder of this article focuses on a number features that have helped the AKEL survive the collapse of Soviet communism. The overarching point is that in the midst of the crisis facing communism the AKEL kept its main organizational features intact. Whereas most West European Communist parties brought about significant changes to their basic organizational model, the AKEL maintained its organizational structure.

Building and sustaining a Leninist party

An outsider to the political system the AKEL relied from the very beginning on its organizational infrastructure to gain access to political structures. As a political “out” to the colonial political system (Shefter 1977: 411; Katz and Mair 1995: 10; van Biezen 1997: 35), the party realized early enough the need to supplement its ideological appeals with effective organizational mechanisms for mass mobilization. In line with deeply ingrained Leninist principles, the party acknowledged that its organizational resources were critical for the realization of its ideological objectives. The party set up a complex formal organizational structure with parallel organizational units at the local and district level. Being outlawed during its early years (1931--41) it was forced to be very selective in the recruitment of members. Prospective members had to go through several tests before being granted membership during a six month trial period. The strict selection process was thought to act as a protecting shield against the alteration of its Leninist character. As the Organizational Secretary of the Party points out:
Being outlawed the AKEL was forced to be very careful in the recruitment of new members. There are stories of prospective members being showed a gun during the screening process, and waiting for weeks or months to test whether they would tell anyone, before being let in. The AKEL laid emphasis in a careful selection process because of the conditions that existed at the time. Today, the party remains the strictest of all parties in the recruitment of new members.4

The adverse political environment in which the party had to operate reinforced the dominance of the extra-parliamentary party, as embodied in the party congress. The initial conditions also helped the party enforce cohesion and discipline as well as effective channels for communicating its messages to its constituency – both official channels, like the party press Haravgi, and unofficial.

Throughout the years the AKEL has managed to preserve its basic organizational structure and to adjust it in ways that reinforce its organizational capacity. Bucking the trend evident in some of its West European counterparts toward organizational decay, the AKEL has managed to sustain its dense network of party base units and party cells, which totaled 535 in 2007 – approximately, one cell per 1500 inhabitants of Cyprus.5 As a number of party cadres pointed out, this dense local network allows the party to efficiently transmit messages to its base within a very limited amount of time. More importantly, it allows the party leadership to have a good sense of where its members stand on major issues. “We do not need to undertake an opinion poll to know what our people are thinking. There is a two-way relationship of the party with the people, due to the structure of the AKEL which is organized everywhere.”6 Given the importance the party ascribes

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4 Christos Alecou, Organizational Secretary and Member of the Secretariat of the Central Committee, AKEL, May 2012, Nicosia.
5 Figures extracted from official party documents.
6 Yiannakis Kolokasides, Member of the Secretariat of the Central Committee, AKEL, May 2012.
to this dense local network, it is not surprising that the party base units managed to survive the gradual shift of the Cyprus economy to the tertiary sector. Adjusting to the changing social conditions, after 1990 the AKEL started setting up party base units in residential areas as well as the workplace. At a time when political parties are facing growing difficulty to claim time from their members, the party base units are almost totally active, as 93% of these units hold annual general assemblies (AKEL 2007).

While making minor adjustments to the way it organizes, the AKEL leadership has traditionally signaled the importance of organizational stability and continuity. Party congresses are held without deviation every five years and district congresses are organized every four years (AKEL 2011a: Articles 12, 17). Fully aware of the importance of sustaining its organizational capacity, the party periodically holds organizational conferences to address problems of organization. These conferences systematically warn against organizational laxity and attrition, and set up targets and control mechanisms to achieve organizational objectives. Moreover, on an annual basis, the party sets quantifiable targets for new members, party press circulation, fund raising, and number of events (e.g. ideological lectures and seminars). At the end of the year, the AKEL checks the achievement of these targets (see for example, Table 2). Furthermore, after each electoral contest, the party undertakes an evaluation, emphasizing the impact of its organizational capacity on the electoral results. Without exception, internal documents highlight the importance of organization in the party’s electoral performance.7 For example, the most recent regular congress of the party noted that “the organizational condition of the party is the solid basis of its political and electoral successes” (AKEL 2011b: 78).

7 Alekou, May 2012.
The organizational stability of the party is also documented by membership figures, which show the AKEL membership to remain stable at around 14 thousand (Table 3). Even in the midst of the upheaval that threatened to split the party in the late 1980s, the AKEL managed to enlist 735 new members and lost only 200 (AKEL 1990: 9). At a time when most mass parties in Europe have been facing membership decline, the AKEL managed to sustain its membership base, and in recent years to slightly improve it. Party data shows that the vast majority of the members -- about 89% -- diligently pay their dues. As a percentage of the overall votes the AKEL has been receiving in parliamentary elections, the membership density of the party has experienced a notable decline but this is largely because the party is strict in the recruitment of new members. “We are careful in the selection of new members. The goal has always been to compensate for natural decay due to deaths and inertia in order to restore our membership at least at the previous levels.”

The selectivity in the recruitment of new members becomes obvious when one takes into account the membership figures of the AKEL’s main competitor, the Democratic Rally,

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8 Kolokasides, May 2012.
which boasts more than 35 thousand members among a similar number of voters (Christophorou 2006: 522). By carefully selecting its new members, the party aims to sustain its coherence and to recruit individuals who will gradually become preachers of the party line. To facilitate this process, the AKEL undertakes the education of new party members through internal lectures, seminars and courses. The “Material of the School for AKEL Members” includes specific references to the importance of “consistently upholding the organizational principles” of the party, the operation of the party base units and preparatory tips for effective participation in the general assembly of the units (AKEL 1994a). Party members are known to share a strong party culture combining well-ingrained adherence to collectivist behavior and a deep suspicion of activity that sets the individual above the party or sets the basis for the establishment of clientelist relations between party officials and voters – what the AKEL leadership calls “paragontismos” (e.g. AKEL 2011b: 81).

**Table 3: AKEL membership and organizational density**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number of members</th>
<th>Number of voters (year of election)</th>
<th>Density %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td>15.750</td>
<td>87,628 (1985)</td>
<td>17.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>14.000</td>
<td>87,628 (1985)</td>
<td>15.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>14.000</td>
<td>121,958 (1996)</td>
<td>11.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>14.752</td>
<td>132,163 (2011)</td>
<td>11.16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: Party congress documents and annual assessments of organizational capacity.

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9 This is the edition of the party material used today.
The party is not only very careful in the selection and education of party members upon their entry into the AKEL but it is also quite demanding when it comes to participation in party organs. Membership in the central committee and the central control committee of the party requires at least seven years of “continuous and active party life.” Eligible participants to the party congress and to regional assemblies can only be those who have actively served a minimum of three years in the party. Eligible candidates to the regional assembly require at least five years of active party involvement. Even for elected office in the local base units there is a requirement of two years of continuous and active party life (AKEL 2011a). By asking for continuous and active service to the party, the AKEL limits the possibility of abrupt changes that would threaten its coherence.

The continuity in the way the AKEL organizes is also evident in the dominance of the official party organs over other components of the party. Defying international trends induced by the growing importance of the state in the dissemination of party resources (Katz and Mair 1994), the extra-parliamentary component of the AKEL remains much more dominant than the parliamentary caucus of the party. The parliamentary wing of the party follows and abides by the decisions of the party congress without any known exception. The dominance of the extra-parliamentary party is also evident from the composition of the politburo of the AKEL, which is largely made up of permanent party officials who do not have public office or parliamentary seat. Since 1990 the party has tried to make an opening to new constituents by accommodating non-party personalities to join the AKEL’s “new forces” (AKEL 1991: 15). These individuals usually run as candidates in the national parliamentary elections and take up a few parliamentary seats. To sustain its autonomy and coherence the party has kept these “friends of the party” outside the AKEL, and has made sure that their actions are in line with the decisions of the congress and the central committee.
The continuity of the AKEL’s basic organizational structures must not be taken as indication of organizational rigidity. In the past decades Cypriot communists have shown a notable capacity to adapt to changing sociopolitical conditions without altering their basic organizational model. Some examples of party adaptation have already been mentioned: organizing party base units at the place of residence, rather than the workplace; and recruiting “friends of the party” as candidates in elections. Another important example relates to developments that Panebianco associated with the transformation of the “mass party” into the “electoral professional” party (1988). In response to the new media environment brought about after 1990 by the liberalization of the media industry, Cypriot communists started adjusting their traditional campaign methods supplementing door-to-door canvassing and outdoor rallies with professional campaign techniques (see also Christophorou 2006). Aware of the growing difficulty in concentrating large audiences in mass rallies and of the growing fragmentation of the electorate, the party has turned to thematically focused indoor events targeting increasingly smaller and more specific audiences. Furthermore, the party has been hiring communication specialists undertaking specific research tasks and opinion polls for the party. The party has also been placing advertisements on mass-audience TV programs and non-party newspapers, seeking exposure beyond that offered to the AKEL by the loyal party newspaper *Haravgi*. Since the liberalization of the media industry there have also been efforts to indirectly control various news outlets, by placing party cadres or friends of the party in key positions. One example is *Astra* radio whose board is headed by the member of the Secretariat of the Central Committee, Yiannakis Kolokasides.

These minor adjustments to the organizational strategy indicate the adaptability of the AKEL to its changing environment. At the same time, however, they remain marginal to the overall organizational infrastructure of the party, which remains unchanged. In fact,
the party has demonstrated a capacity to smoothly incorporate these changes into its basic organizational model. For example, although the party increasingly uses conventional and new media in its campaigns, its advertisements publicize the party and its program rather than the personal qualities of its candidates.¹⁰ And while the party now turns to campaign specialists for advice, the professional insights of these experts are subjected to rigorous scrutiny from party organs, thereby limiting their influence on party strategy.¹¹ Overall, then, the party displays a capacity to adapt to the changing environmental conditions in ways that do not alter its organizational autonomy and strength.

Relations with auxiliary organizations

The organizational mechanism of the AKEL is bolstered by a number of auxiliary organizations—what the party calls “the popular movement.” As is usually the case with mass parties in general and communist parties in particular these auxiliary organizations represent important segments of society like workers, peasants, women and the youth. They offer to the AKEL a dense network of officials and members to communicate messages, mobilize supporters and recruit members. There are four main organizations that are usually associated with the “popular movement.” The biggest is the largest trade union in Cyprus, the Pancyprian Federation of Labour (PEO), which has been politically attached to the party since 1941. The United Democratic Organization of Youth (EDON) has been affiliated with the AKEL since 1944 and organizes the youth of the party recruiting children who are six or older. The Pancyprian Federation of Women’s Organizations (POGO) was originally established in 1945 and the Union of Cypriot Farmers in 1946 (EKA). Beyond these organizations the AKEL is also affiliated with a

¹⁰ In the 2011 parliamentary elections, for example, party outdoor and print advertisements highlighted the various components of the party program. None of the advertisements printed the name or showed the face of a candidate.
¹¹ Alekou, May 2012.
number of cultural, athletic and professional associations and clubs albeit with varied success, especially with the latter (Charalambous and Christorphorou 2012). The party is known for the hundreds of clubs it helps set up in neighborhoods and villages, “which help create an emotional bond between the party and its supporters.”

To understand the relations of the AKEL with the popular movement it is important to take into account the conditions in which this relationship originated. Unlike many of its counterparts, upon its founding in 1926, the Cyprus Communist Party could not count on an existing network of solid mass organizations for support. Due to the late and light industrialization of the Cypriot economy, trade unions were at an infantile stage of development in the 1920s. During this period, then, Cypriot communists helped establish or reorganize these nascent trade union organizations, in ways that left a lasting imprint on the subsequent relationship between the party and trade unions. Early on, the party took a leading role in these labor organizations and, throughout the 1930s, when the party was banned by the British colonial authorities, Cypriot communists channeled their activity through the trade union movement. By the time PEO came into existence the communists had established de facto control of the trade union movement. As a leading member of the AKEL points out, “We have founded PEO, not the other way around. This is different from what happened in many European countries.”

The parallel development of political and social organization in Cyprus, and the leading role the AKEL had in the latter, structured the relations of the party with the popular movement in the subsequent decades. The AKEL constitutes the nucleus of concentric circles (Figure 1) using these auxiliary organizations as means to reinforce its social influence. All four auxiliary organizations have considerable operational autonomy but

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12 Interview with Andros Kyprianou, AKEL General Secretary, 8 June 2012.
13 Alekou, May 2012.
take ideological and political guidance from the party. While there is no hierarchy between the various movements there is a clear hierarchy between each auxiliary organization and the AKEL. The hierarchical link is much stronger with the youth organization EDON and the women organization POGO than with the unions of workers (PEO) or farmers (EKA). Representing broader economic interests, the latter have more autonomy and flexibility than the former, which are more or less party subsidiaries. As the general secretary of PEO points out, “politically and ideologically there is an informal acknowledgement that the party directs the popular movement. In social and labor issues, though, the role of PEO is important. It is not a one- but a two-way relationship.” The hierarchical component of this relationship is established through the overlap in the party and movement leadership. For example, all generalsecretaries of PEO have been members of the AKEL politburo and most leading figures in the four movements have been members of the central committee. In the latest party congress, 29 out of the 105 members elected in the central committee were salaried employees in one of the auxiliary organizations. Due to the application of democratic centralism (see below), this organizational overlap gives AKEL an efficient mechanism to transmit political decisions to the popular movement.

14 Kyprianou, June 2012.
15 Interview with Pambis Kyritsis, General Secretary of PEO and Member of the Secretariat of the AKEL’s Politburo, June 2012.
The hierarchical relationship between the AKEL and the popular movement became the focus of considerable tension in the late 1980s but remained intact. After the AKEL lost nearly a sixth of its electorate in the 1986 parliamentary elections (see Table 1) and as Mikhail Gorbachev’s modernization policies in the Soviet Union gained speed, there was growing discontent within the party about its internal workings. The electoral defeat was associated with an ill-conceived and barely-discussed\textsuperscript{16} cooperation with the center-Right, thereby giving the dissenters an opportunity to capitalize on Gorbachev’s modernization drive to push for changes in intraparty organization. Coming from the top leadership of the PEO, this internal dissent was subsequently transferred in the trade union. The union

\textsuperscript{16} Alekou, May 2012.
leadership argued that PEO should follow the experience of trade unions like GSEE in Greece, Intersindical in Portugal, CGT in France and CGIL in Italy, which were based on principles like independence, autonomy and pluralism (Dinglis 2010: 409-413). They asked that PEO follow a different trajectory, and become a “truly non-partisan, independent, autonomous and robust, consistent class-based trade union” (Dinglis 2010: 412). As the current general secretary of PEO and former AKEL MP Pambis Kyritsis recalls, “the relationship between the AKEL and PEO – whether PEO should continue to have this explicit link with the AKEL – became a source of tension in the late 1980s. The majority decided that the trade union should remain attached to the party. Those trade unions that followed a different trajectory in Europe were eventually weakened.”17 At this critical juncture, then, the AKEL decided against cutting the umbilical cord with the trade union and kept a basic feature of its organizational model unchanged.

The maintenance of the relationship with the popular movement has offered AKEL significant organizational advantages. First, through the work of PEO or EKA, the popular movement helps reinforce the political authority of AKEL in Cypriot society by building class conscience.18 Second, the popular movement has significant organizational resources, which can be used to communicate party messages to the wide membership base of these auxiliary organizations. The four organizations employ hundreds of paid officials – all party members – who on a daily basis act as intermediaries between the party and its voters. While autonomous from the party, the professional machinery of organizations like PEO and EKA “allows the party to communicate with workers and farmers at any time. Within 24 hours we can have our voice everywhere. This is

17 Kyritsis, June 2012.
18 Kyritsis, June 2012.
particularly important because, as you know, we do not have help from the media in spreading our messages.”19 Third, the organizational network of the popular movement furnishes the party with an efficient mechanism for recording voter preferences. Due to this mechanism, the party leadership has a good sense of where the base stands on critical issues before making suggestions to the higher party organs. This mechanism also acts as a shield protecting the party from grievances created by party decisions.20 This has been especially the case with PEO, which in recent years had to half-heartedly consent to a number of austerity measures, which put it at odds with a significant segment of its membership base. Finally, the popular movement constitutes a recruitment pool for new party members. EDON spearheads efforts to renew the membership base of the AKEL, by bringing young people into its fold, socializing them into the communist subculture, and educating them in both ideological and practical terms, before promoting them to the party ranks. The youth organization is considered by many cadres as the lifeblood of the AKEL, ensuring the stability of its membership base and the vitality of its ideology.

The application of democratic centralism

One of the most important elements of continuity in the organizational model of the AKEL relates to the application of democratic centralism. Originally formulated in the Russian revolutionary movement, democratic centralism has been part of the communist DNA. It evolved during the Stalinist era into a forceful mechanism for ensuring cohesion, stifling dissent and enforcing discipline (Waller 1981). It was often accompanied with the establishment of a large bureaucratic apparatus of party functionaries at the service of a small leadership team or even a single individual. After the end of the Stalinist era the basic tenet of democratic centralism – the strict subordination of the minority to the

19 Alekou interview, May 2012.
20 Kyritsis interview, June 2012.
majority – started creating tensions within West European communist parties and, along with other issues, it gave rise for calls for departure from this model. The Soviet liberalization push of the late 1980s offered dissenters within these parties an opportunity to dismantle or transform what many considered as an anachronistic model of communist organization, and hence, move away from democratic centralism. As almost all West European communists, the AKEL faced considerable pressure to liberalize its internal workings. Unlike most of its counterparts, though, Cypriot communists chose to keep the centralizing mechanisms of the party intact.

Since its founding the AKEL adopted and applied democratic centralism as means to sustain party cohesion in a hostile political environment. Democratic centralism appears prominently in all party documents. The party statute unambiguously states that “the AKEL is established upon the principle of democratic centralism. That is, it is based on intraparty democracy, centralized leadership and conscious discipline” (AKEL 1968; see also 1982; 1986a). The strict application of democratic centralism led to the expulsion of leading members of the party throughout its history, including two general secretaries Ploutis Servas and Fifis Ioannou in 1952. To enforce party discipline and cohesion the party relied on the central vigilance office, which reported to the central committee any internal dissent to party decisions, factionalist tendencies or anti-party behavior. Party documents clearly outline rules for enforcing party discipline and procedures for penalizing, and ultimately expelling, those who undermine party the unity of the party (e.g. AKEL 2011a: Article 23).

The strict enforcement of democratic centralism came under question in the late 1980s, during the Soviet liberalization initiatives. In the midst of a major leadership succession in 1988, prominent members of the party challenged its monolithic tendencies and
demanded a departure from anachronistic practices that stifled internal dissent. Their criticism of the party leadership eventually led to their departure and to the founding of a new party, ADISOK, which proved short-lived. The internal upheaval in the AKEL – the most serious since the 1950s – ended with the prevailing of the orthodox communist line but also signaled the need for modernizing the organizational infrastructure of the party to cope with growing demands for intraparty democracy. Ahead of the 17th congress, the leadership utilized the organizational machinery of the party to involve the grassroots in an in-depth discussion about the future course of the party.

This was one of the best and most critical periods for the party. The party leadership swiftly decided to take these pressing issues down to the grassroots. There were meetings everywhere, at all levels. We would start at 7pm and finish well after midnight. This went on for many days. The party opened its ears and listened to the grassroots. It got the message and within three weeks it brought before the congress a number of organizational changes.21

In 1990 the 17th congress decided changes to the statute to enhance intraparty democracy. The revised text noted “that the organizational structure and operation of the Party is based on democratic centralism, with democracy being continuously developed” (AKEL 1991: 10). On account of these changes, party members were given the right to publicly express their opinions through the party press or, if a third of their base unit agreed, to put an issue on the agenda. The party also established a number of consultation offices to help the leadership formulate effective programmatic responses to changing sociopolitical conditions. These offices are staffed with party salaried personnel or party specialists. The 17th congress was also marked by the introduction of operational procedures and

21 Alekou, May 2012.
established secret voting for intraparty elections. Moreover, candidates for public office would be recommended by party cells and nominated by district assemblies.

Despite these notable changes, the AKEL has managed to maintain its Leninist character sustaining the “centralist” elements of its structure. For example, public discussion is confined to the party press and can only be initiated by the central committee or the politburo. The statute of the AKEL makes clear that this public dialogue “ends when a decision is made, which is binding for all party members” (1995: 11). The congress continues to explicitly prohibit the formation of factions or tendencies within the AKEL, and has kept its strict rules for expelling those minority members that refuse to subordinate their views to the binding decisions of the majority. As their counterparts elsewhere (e.g. Bosco 2001), party cadres and documents explicitly state that the party is not a “club” for endless exchange of ideas: once decisions are taken they have to be enforced without exception. Although the central vigilance office is now more concerned with external rather than internal party threats, the central control committee continues to have an active role in ensuring that congress decisions are implemented. In recent years a number of prominent party members – including four former members of parliament – have been expelled from the party, in part because they failed to adhere to an internal rule that they should submit part of their retirement money to the party. All salaried party members who serve in public positions, such as the members of parliament, still have to submit their “public” salary to the party, which undertakes to top up their party salaries with only a portion of that. Salaried cadres who have not served in public office receive part of their retirement money from the party. The centralizing mechanisms of the party remain in existence despite the massive changes brought about by the advent of the media. As discussed earlier, party campaigns are still run centrally and individual candidates

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22 Kolokasides, May 2012.
never appear on party posters. The fee for participating in national or local elections is being paid by the party -- not themselves -- and their expenditures are supposed to be centrally monitored. Moreover, when the issue came up, the party purposefully avoided the organization of its “new forces” to make sure that the party retains central control of campaigns or other political processes. Overall, then, the AKEL has retained its centralizing mechanisms, refusing to alter one of the most fundamental characteristics of Leninist organization. As the general secretary of the party, Andros Kyprianou, points out, “The party has retained and improved its Leninist character. Our goal was never to dismantle the organizational model of the AKEL but to improve it. While the ‘democratic’ aspect of our organizing principle improved, the ‘centralist’ part remained the same.”

Conclusion

In the past decades West European communist parties have confronted similar challenges that led to their electoral demise. With almost no exception West European communism witnessed a downward electoral trend that helped bring about the spectacular collapse or the radical transformation of the political organizations that carried the communist torch. The one major exception to this downward spiral is the communist party of Cyprus. The party has consistently polled around a third of the electorate showing remarkable resilience to the exogenous shock that resulted in the fall of its West European counterparts. This article has showed how the organizational machinery of the AKEL has helped it sustain its electoral strength in this adverse political environment.

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23 Alekou, May 2012.
24 Kyprianou, June 2012.
25 Kyprianou, June 2012.
The key to the electoral endurance of the party has been its organizational continuity. Whereas most of its West European counterparts chose to move away from their Leninist organizational structure, the AKEL kept its organizational model intact. In an era when most parties seem to be enticed by the availability of state and communicative resources to give up their reliance on mass membership, the AKEL has sustained a robust organizational structure based on a dense network of hundreds of local base units, coherent and stable party membership and selective recruitment mechanisms. Moreover, Cypriot communists have also kept a firm partisan bond with auxiliary organizations, refusing to let go of the umbilical cord that connected the party with organized labor. In sharp contrast with the experience of labor-based parties in such varied contexts as Western Europe and Latin America (e.g. van Biezen 1998; Levitsky 2003), the AKEL did not sever its traditional links with trade union PEO nor redefine its relationship with organized labor. When faced with an existential crisis the party sought to bring about incremental changes to its organizational model without transforming itself into a non-communist leftist political organization. The minor adjustments the party made did not alter its Leninist organizational character nor weaken the centralizing mechanisms the party organs have traditionally relied on to enforce the binding nature of their decisions. By sustaining the key components of its organizational infrastructure the party was able to effectively respond to the challenges posed by its external environment, especially in the latter half of the 1980s, when the party faced increasing pressure for change. The organizational density of the party helped the AKEL successfully absorb demands for change by incorporating them into its basic organizational model. And the centralizing mechanisms of the party seem to have shielded it from the factionalism these new changes could have otherwise brought about.
The emphasis on the importance of organizational continuity has solely been based on evidence gathered from a single case, thereby raising questions about the generalizability of the findings. Given the overall fate of West European communism, it might seem as if the case of Cyprus is simply accidental, exceptional and unique. More comparative evidence would certainly be needed before one can make general claims about the importance of organizational continuity. Some of the existing evidence, though, is suggestive of the need to pay closer attention to organizational continuity. This evidence comes from the experience of the Portuguese and the Greek communist parties. Like the AKEL and other West European communist parties, the two parties faced in the late 1980s and early 1990s a period of internal turmoil about their future course. Like the Cypriot counterparts and unlike most of their comrades in Western Europe, Portuguese and Greek communists refused to dismantle their organizational infrastructure and remained attached to — a more rigid and centralist — Leninist organizational model. In response to the exogenous shock of Soviet collapse, the two parties did not radically change their organizational practices but instead chose to reaffirm their Leninist character and sustain their basic organizational matrix (Patricio and Stoleroff 1993; Cunha 1997; van Biezen 1998; Bosco 2001). The two parties do not of course have the electoral clout of the AKEL and their importance lies with their overall trajectory: in the past two decades Portuguese and Greek communists have managed to keep most of their electorate and to remain potent electoral forces with around 8% of the national vote. The contrasting fortunes of parties that chose to dismantle their Leninist organization, like the Italian Communist Party (e.g. Bosco 2001), suggest the comparative relevance of the emphasis placed here on organizational continuity.

The focus on organizational continuity sharply contrasts with comparative accounts emphasizing the importance of organizational adaptability and change. Such accounts
associate the relative success of socialist parties to the strategic flexibility granted by intra organizational structures (e.g. Kitschelt 1994). It has been argued, for example, that the weakly-institutionalized organizational structure of the labor-based Argentine Justicialist Party enabled it to effectively dismantle links with organized labor and hence capitalize on the opportunities available in the political environment (Levitsky 2003). Given the documented importance of party adaptability, it is worth briefly considering why the persistence of highly institutionalized and seemingly rigid Leninist organizational structures pays off. The case of the AKEL offers a tentative explanation for the merits of organizational continuity: instead of diluting the ideological purity of the party, as Michels (1915) would have predicted, organizational stability allows the AKEL to point to its ideological consistency. Given the pragmatic approach the AKEL has adopted in issues like coalition building, government formation, and EU accession, the signaling of ideological consistency through its organizational form is important for maintaining the support of its -- probably much less pragmatic -- party membership. Without this Leninist organizational model the adherence to communist ideals the AKEL officially claims would be much less credible. The party is aware of the link between organization and ideology and its congress decisions routinely remind party members that their organizational input has a clear ideological output (e.g. AKEL 2011b: 78). As in the case of ecological movements (Kitschelt 1988), and to some extent, radical right parties, the way Cypriot communists organize sends strong ideological signals to their supporters. This crucial link, then, between organization and ideology can perhaps explain why swift organizational change is not the optimal response to the challenging political environment facing the AKEL.

Will the organizational model of the AKEL suffice to prevent its eventual decline? After five years in power, the party finds itself isolated, under attack from previous allies and
under the scrutiny of its own supporters. The eurozone debt crisis has pushed Cyprus to the brink of financial catastrophe and to the first recession in nearly four decades. To address these challenges, the AKEL government had to implement a number of austerity measures that, as its leadership admitted, created a lot of strain in its relations with its traditional constituencies. Will the party manage to survive the crisis and sustain its electoral strength? Or will the crisis be the beginning of communist decline?

The 2011 parliamentary elections show that thus far the party has managed to weather the storm. Despite the attrition caused by its tenure in government and despite the record rates of abstention, the AKEL managed to sustain its electoral strength, surprising both competitors and pollsters. The leadership of the party is convinced that the organizational capacity, along with the adherence to Marxist-Leninist principles that this organization signals, is what kept the party afloat. They believe that more than any other time, its organizational machinery enabled the AKEL to mobilize its voters and minimize defections. They hence want to further improve the organizational capacity of the party and to reduce organizational inefficiencies by sharpening its Leninist centralizing mechanisms. Their response to the challenges facing AKEL is deceptively simple: organization, organization, organization.
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Appendix 1 – List of interviewees

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