No Bridge over Troubled Waters: The Cypriot Left Heading the Government 2008-2013 (with Gregoris Ioannou)

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No bridge over troubled waters: The Cypriot Left heading the government 2008-2013*

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Abstract

In 2008, leftists across Europe hailed the election of communist leader Dimitris Christofias to executive office in the Republic of Cyprus as a breakthrough, with grand prospects for progressive, leftward change. The Cypriot left in the form of AKEL seemed to be the exception in the neo-liberal European political universe, offering a new hope and a potential for an alternative political course. AKEL’s rise to executive power was seen as evidence that the left could head the government in a European state and as an example for other left parties. Five years after, when Cyprus has signed a bail-out agreement with the Troika, comparable to the ones in Greece, the right has triumphantly returned back to office, some of the harshest austerity measures have been imposed by EU elites and passed by parliament, and public opinion on the left government’s record is unprecedentedly negative, the issue of communist participation in the executive is once again, rightfully back on the agenda.

Key words: radical left, Cypriot left, AKEL, Christofias, government participation

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Conjunctural hopes in the absence of radicalism

Whether one dismisses with laughter AKEL’s (Progressive Party of the Working People), communism as a rhetorical box, or not, the party is the first one in the EU, positioned to the left of social democracy in its respective party system, which has managed to enter government as the main political force. Certainly, few saw in Dimitris Christofias, its leader and first Cypriot President from the left, a radical and a true communist with ground-breaking potential on the Cypriot political scene. The international media did not concentrate on the then new government’s radicalism; Cyprus’s European ‘partners’ did not voice any substantive worries about the main governing party’s anti-neoliberalism; and those who voted for Christofias together formed the most heterogeneous sections of society, in terms of both ideological orientation and class. But seen in the light of the conjuncture Christofias’ win could be thought to entail the prospects of social organisation that is more balanced towards the interests of lower strata in Cyprus.

The party witnessed very little internal opposition to Christofias’ candidacy. In that context, the theoretical and ideological aspects of government participation by a party that labels itself as communist did not preoccupy even slightly any section of AKEL’s leadership. The main argument of those partisans against nominating Christofias was electoral rather than theoretical: that there was little chance of sustaining a majority in parliament and a strong possibility of unifying the right, thus of providing the foundations for the latter’s ‘early’ return to government. Such worries receded even further into the background during the first years of the Christofias government, when the government’s popularity, as recorded by local polls,
was comfortably high\textsuperscript{ii} and the mainstream media’s coverage of the government’s potential was relatively genial.

Five years onwards, by the end of 2012, the general political climate in relation to the left could not appear to be more contrasting to the one of early 2008, eventually revealing that AKEL’s endeavour in office was fraught with risks to begin with. Opposition to AKEL and the Christofias government was and had been for some time before 2012 five-party strong, and unequivocally blamed those holding office and AKEL as being responsible for everything that could figure easily in populist rhetoric: a number of scandals involving public officials; a catastrophic explosion in the village of Mari, which cost the lives of thirteen people and blew away most of the island’s biggest power station; yet another stalemate on the Cyprus Problem, combined with accusations of too much compromise on behalf of the government on key national issues; an overfed public sector that managed to evade the government’s attention; and the entrance of the country into the European Financial Stability Fund (EFSF).

The government’s record was equally unpopular in terms of public opinion. Throughout 2012, approximately 60% of those asked in polls expressed a negative opinion on Christofias – with approximately one quarter of AKEL voters following this trend – while a positive opinion was expressed by less than 30% (marginally equal to AKEL’s vote share). AKEL’s consolidation vote reached a historic low of 70% in January and 78% at the 17 February 2013 polls\textsuperscript{iii}. Governmental power has led the party towards considerable maneuvering within state structures and a complete familiarisation with many of the evils that (in theory) it was
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supposed to be fighting against. Its high-profile job of governing the country served as a catalyst to the consolidation of a political image that lacked the aura of the political actor that remained unaffected by government spoils. For perhaps the first time in its history and only a few years after it first entered office, AKEL is now seen by many as a corrupted party, similar, if not identical in its lack of ideological ethos to the rest of the office-seeking political elite. It can no longer claim convincingly to constitute a force operating on behalf of the common people, nor can it appear as their genuine defender against daily injustices. Finally, at the end of AKEL’s somewhat tortuous and unflattering trajectory inside government, a new right-wing government headed by DISY leader Nicos Anastasiades was elected to office in the second round of the election, riding on a vote share of 57.5% – unprecedentedly high in the post-1974 stage of stability of the Cypriot party systemiv.

Whether one blames the Christofias’s government for grave mistakes or not, the issue of communist participation in the executive is once again, rightfully back on the agenda.v If one of Europe’s most successful and pragmatic communist parties has faced disaster in government and if, within the first five years of its long awaited endeavour with executive office it has given way to a sweeping victory by the right, then what are the chances of true left radicalism governing capitalism in an incrementally reformist way, just as the radical left’s teleological discourse aspires to do? Assessing why the Christofias government has done so badly in people’s eyes and how it faced the challenge of an executive office first-timer can thus illuminate larger questions about the past, present and future of left radicalism, in Europe and beyond. The act of, and approach to, governmental participation itself becomes thus a central issue. Should the Cypriot and European radical left even try to participate in
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government? Or must it revive its now dying social radicalism and patiently gather the political stamina needed for fully-fledged mobilization against the ills of monopoly capitalism and its neoliberal framework? vi

These are topical questions at a time when radical left parties are in a coalition government in Finland, Denmark and Iceland, just left office in Norway and reoriented themselves towards flirting with entering a coalition government in Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden and Greece. Indeed, Greece’s SYRIZA appears to target office at a time when the country is trapped within a financial deal with the European Central Bank, European Commission and IMF (Troika) that has been transforming the country’s economic and social structure. The examination of the course of the Cypriot radical left party heading the government in the very recent and crucial period in which the current crisis unfolded can thus constitute an analytic example, informative on the wider experience of the radical left assuming executive power.

The perspective we utilise here is largely empirical while in the attempt to explain AKEL’s agency while in government, we also turn to its political tradition and organisational operation. AKEL’s evolution as a party is reviewed in the historical context of modern Cyprus in order to account for the structural imperatives, predispositions and orientations shaping the frame of its agency while in government during 2008-2013.
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AKEL’s reformism in history

Since scholars turned their attention to the Cypriot communist party the one thing that they all agree on is the party’s unremitting pragmatism (Christophorou, 2006; Bale and Dunphy, 2005; Panayiotou, 2006; Peristianis, 2006; Protopapas, 2006; March and Mudde, 2005). What matters the most for the party’s relation with its environment, for its achievements and its shortcomings as a radical left political actor has always been its tendency to compromise. Certainly, for Cypriot standards and judged in accordance with the Cypriot superstructure of norms, behaviours, ecumenical political demands and so on, AKEL has constituted and still constitutes a semi-alternative choice to nationalism, blatant neo-liberalism, the one-dimensional geopolitical orientation towards the West, fancy life styles and consumerism; at least among those political actors with parliamentary representation. But the space represented by AKEL is still large and heterogeneous, not only in class terms, but also in terms of the gamut of left-wing ideology that inhabits the party’s circles.

In any case, AKEL, although linked with the working class upon its formation, has never been strictly a representative of the working class but of its own members, out of which many have shifted class(es) gradually after the party’s establishment, and formed alliances with sections of the Cypriot population that were structurally unconnected to the left in previous times. In order to maintain an electorally much needed balance between the various ideological corners inside and around the party, a reformism for all epochs is combined masterfully with the idea that only the communist party can be the force of real progress in Cypriot society. This,
paradoxical as it may sound, was made feasible by the cultivation and sustaining of a Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy among its core members and supporters.

A firm grip by the leadership over internal educational practices, the downplaying of any serious attempts at ideological dialogue and theorising, integral conception and tight control of the party’s mass organisations, especially its youth and trade union wings EDON and PEO, and the practice of teaching, reminding and celebrating historical moments when the party’s radicalism shone in opposition to the right’s conservatism, nationalism and extremism, ensure continuity in the presence and mindsets of radicals in the ranks of AKEL, and give expression to the more subversive than the leadership, albeit largely symbolic, rhetoric of the party’s left wings\textsuperscript{vii}. Ideology is always put in perspective, with the latter word meaning that circumstances are seen as too difficult and unripe for confrontation to be unleashed, thus requiring a bourgeois, \textit{realpolitik} sense of struggle that can at best be labourist in orientation. In this vein, trade unions’ demands and resistances have always constituted the main spearhead of the party’s political practice.

But while in other countries, where a social democratic force was always stronger than the communists and drifting to the right since the 1960s and 1970s, leaving the space on the left free, in Cyprus, AKEL has been on a mainstream labourist trajectory from its very inception in the early 1940s. While significantly radical in relational terms, it was neither insurrectionist, nor fully against nationalist inclinations (Peristianis, 2006). AKEL’s reformism was thus a given from the outset and this was partly conditioned by the context of
its birth and growth. The disjuncture between the party’s communist rhetoric and its social democratic practice could be easily legitimized, cleverly justified or conveniently blurred within the context of a bi-polar social climate; especially given the fact that when AKEL was starting out there were no Soviet eyes turned on it and operating in a colony had to take into account the national question as well as the battle against social oppression. Yet, labourism in terms of ideology, meaning above all that no revolutionary intentions were expressed by the party, was a conscious choice rather than merely the result of contingencies arising out of British colonialism’s impact on the island, or the only effective ideological expression for mobilizing the masses. There is only slender and highly partisan evidence that the organizational articulation of a counter-hegemonic culture in the form of a mass party in 1940s Cyprus was incompatible with a revolutionary outlook and practice. The only certain assessment is that it was interpreted as incompatible.

Today, perhaps more than ever before, the soundness of that interpretation can be justifiably disputed on the basis of its long-term vision. Painted on a broader canvas, today’s picture tells us that the AKEL may have been overly proud for what it has really achieved so far. It may have contributed to a comparatively high trade union density and the establishment of trade unions as social partners in the economy, the foundation and development of a satisfactory welfare state, the tradition of a relative interventionist role of the state in the market and the ideology of the ‘mixed economy’, a strong cooperative movement and a multi-dimensional foreign policy that has always had a face to the east, but it could not lock the system inside itself, by keeping its institutional achievements frozen in place. Both the dissolution of the
Soviet Bloc and the expansion of the EU to its south and east, were geopolitical developments strong enough to set in motion a process of structural adaptation in the Cypriot economic sphere, inevitably affecting the party itself (Charalambous, 2013).

At least since the early 1990s AKEL’s traditional reformist and consensus-seeking relationship with the working class started changing, not so much in spectacular, sudden or monumental ways, yet in a slow but steady trend, apparently minor but really significant. Above all, AKEL has been paying increasingly less attention to the societal arena, instead concentrating on electioneering. It was always a strong electoral machine, but in the last two decades, it has been predominantly that and little else. Serious ideological reflection as a collective affair remains in the shadows of the party’s activities, while at the same time it is further subjugated to the mobilization of the party’s mechanisms for the purpose of electoral battles and political conflict. There are many factors at play here both international and national, internal as well as external to the party, decisional as well as structural, setting in motion or rather speeding up AKEL’s integration into the political system and moving it towards the centre of the political spectrum, a trend reaching its peak by 2012.

Structure and superstructure in Cyprus

Western communism’s historiography has vividly shown that domestic context always matters because communist political decisions have an inherent component of stratagem that is calculated in accordance with contextual details and local needs, rather than strictly internationalist outlooks. In most cases of political parties, continuity or adaptation can be
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explained by parties’ capacity and willingness to adapt to developments, but at the same time these processes are either catalysed or impeded by environmental factors. They constitute responses to (internal and/or external) developments in the midst of an indigenous political space, a given, albeit evolving social fabric, the dominant ideational frameworks of society, and entrenched economic relations.

The main structural and superstructural characteristics of the Cypriot arena of socio-economic competition are similar to those of most capitalist, liberal democracies, in so far as, those controlling the means of production are also inevitably conditioning the dominant paradigms of society. There are also local nuances however which, although they do not make Cyprus an exception they need to be addressed more specifically: the Cyprus problem and ethnic division more broadly and clientelism and nepotistic practices that reflect the South European norm of state-society affairs and stem from the 1950s and 1960s Greek Cypriot para-state to name the two most important ones. Politically, the working class is highly fragmented, among an increasingly calm social climate, since the post-1960s welfare consensus, featuring tripartite negotiations and significantly institutionalised labour relations. For historical reasons the Church is also an important player in Cyprus, de facto determining political dynamics, exerting significant economic influence and sustaining conservatism and working class division in the cultural and social spheres. At the same time, the continuation of the Cyprus problem accentuates this further as it diverts attention away from purely socio-economic matters, and makes the left-right cleavage encompass a deep national divide, rendering it wider than in the average West European country (Christophorou, 2010).
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In the labour field changes were slower but did speed up in the last two decades. The labour relations system established in the late colonial and early independence times and elaborated and re-affirmed in the aftermath of the 1974 war was based on the one hand on an acknowledgement of trade union power and mass membership and on the other hand on a logic of partnership both between Left and Right trade unions and between labour and the employers. It reflected a balance of social forces as this was formed in the early independence period and crystallised after the war of 1974, and at the same time set up the framework for the development of the following decades (Ioannou, 2010). Employment in the broader public sector remained relatively big and continued to grow with the political parties that emerged in the 1970s, using it as an instrument with which they could both, influence policy and administration, as well as satisfy members and supporters, secure votes and strengthen themselves (Faustmann, 2010). From the 1990s onwards, AKEL joined the other parties in this practice as it was given the opportunity to influence the executive and form stronger linkages to the state bureaucracy by the Vasileiou government, which it supported on the occasion of the 1988 presidential election15.

The demise of agriculture and the booming of the service sector were completed by the mid 1990s, while Cyprus was converted from a labour-exporting into a labour-importing economy8. In the context of the broader socio-economic restructuring which increased the educational level and the living standard of Cypriots, the character of the labour process and the composition of the labour force also underwent significant, and in some respects fundamental change. Office work replaced manual work to a great extent, the worse jobs of
the labour market were gradually taken over by immigrant workers, many persons from working class and agrarian families entered the ranks of the labour aristocracy and the middle class, and various individuals from this class made fortunes out of the real estate business and financial intermediation. The generalised increase in the economic capacity of substantial sections of the population, in conjunction with the relative ease of loan-taking brought about increased consumption along with the ideology of consumerism in a broader context of the neoliberal universe which was becoming established internationally. And of course the demise of collective values, political engagement, social solidarity etc., created rampant individualism and apolitical materialism.

The labour movement (despite the cooperation between trade unions on the labour front) remained divided, with trade unions attached to different political parties. This division was made obvious in the stance adopted by the trade unions vis-a-vis the government in office each time. Beyond differences in rhetoric, that is, and in ideological conceptions of history and identity, the close connection of the main trade unions to the parties resulted in an inability to create and sustain a strong united workers’ front. The division between public- and private-sector workers both with respect to employment terms and conditions, and in terms of degree of party attachment constituted another traditional difficulty in establishing the unity of wage labourers. The most important traditional factor of the division of the working class in Cyprus was the narrow, occupationaly centered conception of interests as this has developed over time in conditions of relatively limited industrial unrest and of sparse solidarity acts across sectors.
Nevertheless, the increased integration of Cyprus into the international economy and its pressures, as well as the process of domestic social restructuring which accompanied this, transformed the labour field in Cyprus and eroded the institutional framework which regulated it. The influx of foreign labour\textsuperscript{xii}, the decline of trade unionism and the international flexibility trend promoted by the EU itself became the main vehicles through which a new and deeper labour force segmentation was established by the 2010s (Ioannou, 2011) – between the primarily unionised older workers who were included in the world of rights and benefits enshrined in the collective agreements and those excluded – primarily new and younger – workers, some Cypriots and many non Cypriots.

At the political level, yet also reflective of wider European and international trends, the expansion, autonomisation and strengthening of finance capital\textsuperscript{xiii}, and its growing direct and indirect influence in politics constitutes a new dimension that needs to be taken into account independently. The expansion of the financial sector is of course a global phenomenon in the neoliberal age\textsuperscript{xiv} – in Cyprus though, it has been rapid and beyond proportion in the last two decades: by 2010, its volume in capital terms reached almost 8 times the country’s GDP, a significantly higher ratio than the European and Eurozone equivalents [being around 3.5 times their GDP] (Stefanou, 2011, quoted in Panayiotou, 2013) while in the period 2005-2010 alone there was a 20\% yearly increase (Orphanides and Syrichas, 2012, quoted in Panayiotou, 2013). This has to be seen in parallel with its penetration in the state as a whole involving all the branches of power and of course the legal establishment and the mass media, which have insulated it from restrictions, and from the need for scrupulous behaviour and criticism of
any source and nature. Banking became conceptualised as the motor of the economy, taking over from tourism by the turn of the century. The rush to satisfy the demands of finance capital by all parties including AKEL, in a generalised attempt to attract more and more offshore money led to successive decreases of corporate tax which dropped to 10% in the 2000s, being one of the lowest ones in Europe – and ironically it was the Troika which forced the Cypriot authorities to increase it to 12% in the fall of 2012.

In the sphere of developments concerning the Cyprus problem, nationalism has neither been defeated nor limited to the margins. The opening of some checkpoints in 2003 was arguably a significant development with great potential (Demetriou, 2007), yet despite the high hopes it generated, it did little in the direction of opening up the road to reunification. In the period of the Annan Plan 2002 – 2004, bi-communal initiatives at the societal level expanded significantly, aided also by EU and US money, but no party (including AKEL) made a real effort at turning its pro-rapprochement rhetoric into practice challenging the nationalist norms upon which ethnic division is maintained and reproduced. The discourse of self-victimisation, national pride and Turkish inflexibility as the cause of everything related to the Cyprus problem has not only remained dominant, but also so strong that coalition governments form and collapse upon its wide appeal. More importantly, no real challenge to the political parties’ dominant presence and influence on matters related to the question of the Cyprus problem has been or was able to be mounted. Bi-communal civil society initiatives that continued to be active after 2004 remained either marginal and with little impact on the political process, or attached themselves to parties and politicians reducing themselves to the
role of a pressure group. However, the partitocratic nature of the Cypriot polity tends to insulate the profiles of political parties from social deliberation and erect obstacles to approaches that seek to scrutinize their conduct with the electorate or deconstruct their Cyprus problem policies.

The Cypriot left is the link between the lack of a strong challenge to existing economic relations and ethnic division. Its culture of patriotism (Panayiotou, 2005; Mavratas, 1997) initially began as antagonistic to nationalism and was unrelated to the party’s socio-economic vision, but soon enough gained an aura of ideological legitimacy that ran counter to revolutionary goals, since the latter might tamper with its momentum among the masses. To a great extent Cypriot left patriotism is an antidote to flirtations with imperialism, while at the same time, it is also prone to identifying some nationalists as patriotic forces that should constitute allies. In this way, Cyprus’s particularities reflect vividly on AKEL’s trajectory. The existence of the Cyprus problem essentially constitutes a permanent ideological excuse to AKEL for avoiding a socially confrontational strategy and for adopting the rhetoric of national consensus when faced with opposition. Thus, the simplification of the thesis on the necessity of adaptation to local conditions, and ignoring with ease the radicalism that would be expected by the internationalist aspect of its official ideology have little repercussion (Charalambous, 2012).

When AKEL is approached within the complex entirety of its context, some, but not all, of its reformism makes historical and comparative sense. Tracing its fortune and to a great extent
also its behaviour in office during the past five years must thus be attempted only within the confines of the main structural characteristics of Cypriot society and politics. There is general consensus among Cypriot left activists that a process of embourgoiesment has been in motion inside AKEL for at least two decades. Yet, there are disagreements as to how deeply this process has affected the party, and as to whether it concerns mostly party cadres or the party’s core constituency as well. A question that arises concerns the extent to which the party is structurally constrained in pursuing a radical left course. Our view is that AKEL’s frequent avoidance of ideological and political confrontation was not inevitable, just like organisational rigidity was not absolutely necessary, especially in the post-1991 period. Thereby, the party’s reformism, as described earlier, has largely been a matter of option. In a society where there have always been many ‘losers’ – of globalization, financialisation, European integration, the partition of the island – strong reformism, radical left assertiveness and a more organisationally polycentric approach engender a competitive advantage that could exploited, if not permanently, then certainly at critical junctures. AKEL has chosen to give up this advantage, which anyway required more ideological discipline in order to be set in motion, in favour of a more conveniently vote-seeking attitude.

AKEL and the hubris of power: A preliminary assessment

When Christofias and AKEL took over in early 2008, the economy was doing well, and with the Turkish Cypriot Left (CTP) still in power in the north part of the island, the circumstances were thought to provide a historic opportunity for the Left to solve the Cyprus problem. In the domestic field of the Republic of Cyprus, DISY refrained from criticising the new
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government, giving it some time and space to proceed with the negotiations which had restarted, while the centrist parties EDEK and DIKO, known as hardliners or rejectionists on the Cyprus problem, were then partners in the government and initially criticised the government in indirect ways and framed their attacks in a quasinofficial manner. At the international level things were even more promising and European reactions to Christofias’s election were largely positive xv.

Gradually though, as progress in the Cyprus problem negotiations remained limited, despite some spectacular events such as the opening of Ledras street and Limnitis checkpoints, and as the economic situation begun to deteriorate by early 2010, criticism against the government became more and more intense and the political attacks against it more and more aggressive. At this point EDEK withdrew from the government coalition and DISY confronted directly the government regarding its Cyprus problem policy as well. By 2011 the government headed by AKEL was operating in a very hostile environment. Christofias himself had become the main target of a sustained offensive not only by the Right and the Church leadership, but by a whole choir of social and political actors, opinion leaders, the media, politicians going against their party line, high-ranking university professors, technocrats etc. Christofias’ personality, habits, speaking manners and poor knowledge of the English language, had been used in an attempt to undermine the politics of his presidency. In a sense, an attempt was made to depoliticise Christofias’ presidency reducing complex issues to matters of human personality and degenerating political criticism to personalised attacks. All the private media participated in this attempt of deconstruction and demonisation, which often took the form of ridicule.
Christofias, however, did exhibit traits of bad statesmanship and in doing so alienated parts of the liberal, social democratic left and other floating voters, who pay attention to management capacity, persona and communication strategy. His long delays in refilling key public positions that were left empty for one reason or another, rumours that had him promoting and appointing in key positions only those who flattered him, his tendency to shed tears when surrounded by partisan audiences, his omission of an apology after the explosion in Mari, and more generally a deeply flawed communication strategy have not conditioned social developments themselves, but did have a negative reflection on certain sections of public opinion, especially since at the same time the President was getting daily doses of grave, policy-related accusations as well. But while the role of the President’s persona was not, to use Plekhanov’s words, a quantité négligeable (Plekhanov, 1940), its significance can only be uncovered within the context of the immense propaganda against him.

The explosion in Mari in the summer of 2011 served as a catalyst in and of the process described above, magnifying the scope and intensity of the attack, uniting the opponents of the government, diffusing a negative image of Christofias personally and of the Left as a whole, and making obvious the weak position in which AKEL found itself. The aftermath of the tragic Mari accident, signaled a nodal political moment, a turning point with ramifications of a quasi historical nature. So strong was the opposition’s reaction that executive-legislative relations themselves took an unprecedented turn, with the parliament exercising rights that it had previously neglected; such as voting on a resolution regarding foreign policy
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and imposing the restriction that any changes decided by the board of the semi-governmental organisation, Cyprus Airways, have to be approved by parliament.

The incident effectively allowed, facilitated and galvanised a shift in the dominant political and economic paradigm which although not completed there and then, symbolically and spectacularly – as AKEL did not concede defeat, with Christofias essentially refusing to resign – was evident only some months later. The accident itself changed the domestic opportunity structure of Cypriot political competition, especially given the left’s inadequate communication strategy in its attempt to shift the blame from itself to the army and the ‘deep state’s’ bureaucratic apparatus, which as it argued were effectively responsible for what had happened. A number of entrenched and sometimes overlapping societal reflexes, such as fundamentalist anti-communism, nationalism and neoliberalism, were unleashed, encouraged by the mass media, and utilized by the opposition against the left in general and Christofias in particular.

Out of the above, neoliberalism won the day. The further deterioration of the economic situation and the withdrawal of DIKO (the centrist, but undyingly nationalist Democratic Party) from the government as well could have been an opportunity for AKEL to “turn left” – making use for example of the de facto alliance with the trade unions and initiating a tax reform so that the rhetoric of “taxing wealth” could be somehow made concrete. In fact by the end of 2011 it was clear that the opposite was happening. The third austerity package implemented in December 2011 was particularly significant and illustrative of the trend
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coming – unanimously agreed by all the political parties and against the will of the trade unions and workers’ interests. This violated the institution of “social dialogue” and was overtly in favour of business, which welcomed it while demanding more.

The austerity measures of 2011 were not extremely harsh on the working class, compared to those adopted in 2012 and lasting until 2015. To be sure, they might seem insignificant when compared to what lies ahead for Cypriot society xviii. Nevertheless they were crucial because they signalled and made obvious dramatic changes in the labour field that constituted longer-term trends but that were exacerbated and speeded up in the current conjuncture of the economic crisis. The door was opened in December 2011 for the worse. To the careful observer three distinct regressions were clear: a) the deterioration of public sector terms and conditions of employment, was setting up the example for the private sector (wages freezes and further decreases followed in the private sector only one month later). b) the treatment of negotiations and bargaining with the trade unions as an unnecessary luxury taking up too much time unanimously by all the political parties violated not only the letter, but most importantly the spirit of the celebrated “social dialogue” and c) AKEL’s affirmation that it was ready to fully march along the path of post 1990s international social democracy effectively adopting a neoliberal logic, (and disrespecting workers’ interests) because as it said “there was simply no other alternative”. Based on the unrefined but unremmitingly used (by AKEL) logic of ‘the lesser of two evils’, this approach was obediently accepted by PEO itself despite some discontent which in any case was not made public. Moreover AKEL’s reluctance in 2011 to differentiate itself clearly from the rest of the political agents who
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demonised the civil servants was indicative of its lack of foresight of the spill-over effect: the
demonisation of the public sector as a whole, as well as a lost opportunity to win over a
section of the public sector who traditionally voted centre right parties\textsuperscript{xxix}.

The government’s choice of Finance ministers (two out of the three appointed during the
government’s tenure were known and highly paid bankers, while the other, although a high
ranking AKEL member, was also involved in finance, and known as a moderate social
democrat) signifies a strategy of cooptation with the markets, that aimed at calming investors
by signalling that the government’s intentions were not radical. However, it did also signify a
deeper and more structural situation – AKEL itself has developed over the years ties with
capital that imposed limits both on its political and organisational autonomy. These ties
extend far beyond the fact that some of its members are themselves small and medium
businessmen or even millionnaires or that a substantial section of its supporters belong now to
the traditional or new middle classes. AKEL itself founded and ran companies in need of
loans (see Charalambous and Christophorou 2013; Bale and Dunphy 2006), while the
growing apparatus of the party and its mass organisations became difficult to sustain in the
changed and more competitive conditions of the late 20\textsuperscript{th} Century – especially after the
collapse of the USSR cut a vital supply of funding.

It might be the case that, AKEL and the Christofias government were not connected to the
banks to the extent that they could know or find out about the mismanagement undercurrents
that would soon lead the state and thus the government to budgetary problems. Bank scandals
are still a subject of investigation and Cypriot banks’ investments in Greek bonds were not revealed until well after the Greek ‘haircut’ (Panayiotou, 2013). Otherwise, the President himself and the government spokesman would have refrained from saying frequently throughout 2010 that Cyprus would remain unaffected by the economic crisis in Europe, as this could easily have boomerang effect. Yet, the parliamentary left’s connection to the banks has been long enough to explain why on occasions AKEL’s and the government’s rhetoric on the evils of the banks sounds insincere.

The rise of the Left to executive power in 2003 as a coalition partner and as head of the government since 2008 not only did not arrest the process of bank domination – in fact it reinforced it at the symbolic level with the with the abonnement of bankers as finance ministers during Christofias’ time in office. By 2012, AKEL, of course, developed a rhetoric “against the banks” but this was – and was seen – as largely empty; especially if one takes into account the fact that the government acted as a guarantor, allowing the Cypriot banks to borrow money from the ECB without imposing any conditions on them as to how they should use that money. In effect, the money was lost in speculative investments on Greek bonds and precarious loans instead of being used to lower the interest rates and benefitting the island’s real economy. And that rhetoric seemed even more empty when the government bailed out the banks without nationalising them and without even thinking of restructuring the operation of the banking system, while imposing a series of heavy austerity measures on the society.
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How has finance capital sustained its control over the state during the past five years? Essentially, by capitalising on AKEL’s catch-all nature. As medium and smaller capitalists, represented by AKEL, became indirectly dependent on finance capital, so did the latter manage to exert ideological influence on individual members of the party’s leadership and to reduce to a diachronic minimum the party’s antagonism towards the banks²⁹. Recent revelations that companies connected to the Popular Movement and registered under the names of leading partisans were provided with favourable repayment conditions for their loans by the Bank of Cyprus – although most possibly used by the mainstream press in order to shift some of the banks’ blame to AKEL and the government – illustrate the party’s deep immersion into the workings of Cypriot finance capitalism. AKEL may have been completely unconnected to the banks’ scandals that have emerged in the past two years, but it has also not erected any substantive obstacles to the situation that led to these scandals. When its financial or political interests demanded it, AKEL downplayed or even totally ignored the oversized structure of the Cypriot banking system, forged convenient relations to the banking elite and utilised its connections to secure the resources its activity required; this was done to the extent that when AKEL’s discourse eventually did turn against the banks, its stance was justifiably less convincing and effective than it could have been.

But there is a more deeply organisational side to the story as well. AKEL’s political reformism is not combined with a flexible organisational approach to politics, but rather with an orthodox, centralised and fissiparous one. AKEL has never engaged in genuine dialogue with the Cypriot extra-parliamentary left and the intellectual scene producing critical and
emancipative ideas systematically excluded from dominant discourse. Policy proposals and the scarce ideological analyses of the party always stem from within the central leadership, meaning that during incumbency they were effectively the product of the government’s political and electoral interests. So synchronised has been the rhetoric of party and government on the Memorandum of Understanding that every time the mainstream press revealed tension between Christofias and the party’s Central Committee, the party spokesman would do anything in his power to make such impressions dissolve. When the government announced its counterproposals to the measures endorsed by the troika, in October 2012, AKEL’s Central Committee voted in their favour (Typos.com, 2012). The omnipresence of parliamentarians and central party officials (some of whom were also government officials) in the ranks and decision-making mechanisms of the Popular Movement ensured that the party in public office remains dominant over the whole of the party organisation. Linkage between party and government was thus never an issue to be seriously questioned by the trade unions and the rest of the party’s ancillary or affiliated structures. The organic element in AKEL’s relations with what is known as the Popular Movement tampered with, rather than reinforced, the latter’s influence on the government xxi. For AKEL, the Christofias government has been a strictly political affair insulated and detached from the party’s societal branches.

The party’s internal polls, held frequently throughout AKEL’s time in government focused on voters rather than members and were aimed at coming up with the right adjustments in light of swings in public opinion that concerned the President’s policy vis-à-vis his main opponent, right-wing leader Nicos Anastasiades. The polls were focused on the government rather than
the party or the left more broadly, simply continuing AKEL’s habit to fish in the centrist voter pools. But AKEL’s electoralism was further evident in the limited attention paid to the party base. Rarely did party cells meet throughout the 2008-2013 period and therefore rarely did the leadership try to canvass its core supporters, choosing instead to pursue broader appeals and thus diluting its differentiating traits from the other political forces.

Charavgi – AKEL’s mouthpiece – as well as all of the party’s published materials and leadership rhetoric did not make even the slightest attempt to project anything more than the government as the main thing to follow and support. Due to the presence of Political Bureau and Central Committee members in key positions on the newspapers’ team, always including the Chief Editor and/or General Manager, a strictly partisan lens filters the selection of articles and opinion pieces in Charavgi, ensuring that defending the government remained an unshaken priority. In retrospect, the post-election ‘warnings’ that were uttered by the party’s leadership in early 2008, about the necessity of distinguishing between the government and the party, prove to have constituted mere communication signals, shortsightedly aimed at the small minority of those supporters who were still unsure of the left’s and the party’s prospects once in power. AKEL was identified completely with the government and thereby, any faults stemming from the executive had a negative reflection on both the party and the left-wing movement as a societal current.

No matter how unpleasant the Christofias government may have been for party supporters, the leadership itself has phobically avoided any kind of self-criticism. Neither the organisational
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Congress of 2009, nor the Congress of 2010, nor any subsequent plenary session of party cadres have hinted at faults, drawbacks or gaps on behalf of party or government between 2008 and 2012. Such has been the entrenchment of social bipolarism within AKEL’s ranks that the potential for self-criticism and even genuine soul-searching has always and especially now been approached as conceding ground to the right, thus undermining the left’s competitive position within the party system. The manifestation or toleration of any degree of indiscipline had as always a strong counter-argument to face, so common in the history of mass communist electoralism: a self-critical behavior would only serve to lay the ground for the empowerment of the Right and thus indirectly but inevitably damage the working people.

Nevertheless, from a left Keynesian point of view, which AKEL has been cultivating among its social milieu for decades now, the Christofias government’s balance sheet is anything but impressive. Even if we take under consideration that the government managed to retain the support of only a minority inside parliament for the most part of its tenure, the issue at hand is not only what law proposals the executive actually passed on to the parliament, but also how much effort it really put in trying to turn them into law or propagandize and build momentum in their favour. None of the government’s electoral programme’s relatively radical reform proposals were seen through to the end of the policy-making process – educational reform, which initially aimed at reducing ethnocentrism and cultivating a culture of peace and reunification (initially contemplating even the removal of religious instruction as a compulsory subject on schools’ curriculums) was soon moderated and compromised after the nationalist and conservative reactions became loud, and eventually restricted into minor and
primarily technical changes, abandoning the attempt for philosophical re-orientation\textsuperscript{xxii}; land tax reform was hastily prepared, insufficiently backed up and eventually unable to secure a parliamentary majority\textsuperscript{xxiii}; the electoral promise about the reduction of the term of compulsory military service was scraped even before reaching parliament.

Structural reforms were not only decidedly avoided, but on certain occasions, not even the minimum amount of societal pressure – that AKEL has been in a comparatively unique position to unleash if it so wishes – was exercised against capital’s coalitions inside parliament. As soon as the parliamentary majority erected an obstacle to the government’s plans, no further attempt was made at the formation of a positive public climate in favour of the measures. Defeat in parliament was followed by political complaints and accusations against the other parties, but soon even complaining receded into the background. On one undoubtedly symbolic occasion, both the government and AKEL made a wholesale reversal. In 2010 they had proposed a temporary 1% increase in company tax for two years, but after its rejection by parliament and in the context of the 2012 negotiations with the Troika, the non-increase of the company tax and its freezing at 10% became the key “red line” of the government, expressing the national unanimity and receiving accolades from all the other parties.

Perhaps the biggest defeat for the party has been the nomination of Stavros Malas – a non AKELite – for the 2013 presidential election race. Essentially, the choice of Malas signified that AKEL, after a five-year term with its own president, was back where it started:
supporting a personality of the centre-left and adopting approaches and positions – such as for example pure economic liberalism and the reinforcement of national defence – which deviated substantially from any kind of a genuinely left-wing programme. Although AKEL itself has often avoided taking a clear-cut progressive stance in some issues in order not to alienate the conservative flanks of its constituencies, some of Malas' positions were truly alien to the Cyprus Left’s history of trying to modernise a conservative island\textsuperscript{xxiv}. An especially negative picture of the government, and by extension of AKEL’s relation to executive office, could be hardly reversed by a candidate from AKEL’s ranks during the election campaign. AKEL may have regarded the government’s low popularity as largely ‘constructed’ by the media and various opinion leading social groups, but this didn’t stop it from approaching it as a given. For the President himself to run as a candidate for the second time, with Government support, included the risk of a heavy defeat and thereby, the total delegitimisation of the policies and politics followed by Christofias and AKEL during the past five years. Although Christofias’ announcement of not running for the presidency was historically the first one by an incumbent president, it was also something anticipated months before the official announcement itself. The choice of Malas seemed to be premised on a three-pronged logic: the attempt to avoid any intra-party conflicts that a partisan candidacy could engender amid especially pressurized circumstances for the party, and the simultaneous protection of the leadership from the hysterical propaganda that the left was expecting; the continuation of AKEL’s line on the
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Cyprus problem and the projection of the government’s policies during the election campaign – something that could not possibly happen if AKEL was to support a candidate from the centre parties; and the creation of the necessary momentum for attracting voters, if not also parties of the centre ground, particularly during the second round of the election. AKEL chose a candidacy for which the worst-case scenario was that of an honourable defeat; that is, the avoidance of an electoral debacle in the first round of the election. Underlying its choice were once again, electoral rather than ideological motives.

So, what was the problem?

AKEL has been reformist, pragmatic and ‘constructively shy’ in its demands since its very inception. While out of government, this strategy has worked electorally and in building up a left counter-culture to the dominant discourse of nationalism, conservatism and neoliberalism. Yet, during AKEL’s non-government years, the centre and the right were not united against the left and the media were not utilised strategically and to such an extent as to delegitimise those holding power; because the incumbents were not a real, ideological enemy of those in opposition; because in no other occasion did centre and right feel truly threatened and infuriated from being excluded from the state’s steering wheel, something that might show, that despite its history of consensualism, AKEL remained an alternative party, whose perceived theoretical radicalism could somehow potentially be activated.
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While on the one hand, the response of the opposition to a minimally reformist left betrays to a certain extent just how aggressive established capitalist interests are since the state is anything but a neutral arbitrator of conflicting social forces, on the other hand it showed that AKEL and Christofias had nothing to lose (and possibly something to gain) by being more demanding and insistent. Within the contours and realities of previous settings when AKEL was co-governing, the party’s style of consensus-seeking was electorally effective and, in conjunction with a solid and centralised organisational structure, it managed to sustain high cohesion levels. But once AKEL entered executive office and its opponents became exponentially more aggressive towards everything connected to the government, this reformism no longer worked. The continuance of the path of its previous, decades-long strategy, and the simultaneous submission of its more radical societal aspects to strictly electoral objectives has proven ineffective both in terms of preventing the right from achieving a sweeping victory and in what concerns working-class interests.

Political scandals that revealed the left’s flirtation with nepotism and patronage, the mishandling of a tragedy involving an explosion in the village of Mari, an inability to move forward on the Cyprus problem due to government coalition dynamics, the unwillingness to reign in public sector employees, and the country’s entrance into the EFSF were all key factors in the failure of AKEL to achieve more in office. Overall, the problem with the Cypriot left heading the government seems to be traced in the party’s strategic continuity: a superstructure upon which right-wing propaganda and insidious attacks on the left were
launched was faced by a behaviour on behalf of AKEL during incumbency that did not differ from that exhibited during the party’s opposition or non-government years.

On one level, the strictly ideological, both AKEL and Christofias failed to realise that being confrontational, socially radical, politically demanding and organizationally sensitive has an ideological value larger than the party itself, larger than the symbolisms of its history. The party and government as political units and institutionalised cultures obtained and maintained sacred status, independent of their reformism, in turn overshadowing those strategic options that could temporarily deprive them of electoral highs and a close relation to the state apparatuses, but generate few but true reforms on society’s fabric with a long-term benefit and impact.

It must not be forgotten that AKEL was governing on its own for almost two years, in a presidential system where ‘by default’ a non-coalition government is faced with opposition by a parliamentary majority, and where the executive is endowed with more constitutional powers than the average president or prime minister in Europe, and thus can enjoy more independence from the whims of the rest of the country’s political forces (see Ker-Lindsay, 2006). In this vein, AKEL’s case is different from that of most other radical left parties having participated in government. Parliamentary systems, unlike the presidential one of Cyprus impose an immediate choice between continuing a centre-left coalition and allowing a right-wing one to substitute it. This has been the story of parties such as Rifondazione Comunista, which has been relegated to minor party status in 2008, following official participation in the
second Prodi Government. Thereafter, if AKEL, which was on its own in government for almost two years and previously was still the main government party did not manage to eschew overly conciliatory tactics that cost it heavily, then it is highly unlikely that other parties of the same family will be able to avoid it if they continue in the tradition of making concensions that contradict both their identity and their main pre-election messages.

On another level, the electoral, the Christofias’ government had very little to show by 2013. A more socially confrontational attitude, a more flexible organizational approach and a more radical discourse and policy by AKEL (even if these would have necessitated more distance between party and government) would at least have more chances at consolidating AKEL’s own supporters, if not also attracting dispassionate lower class votes from the centre parties. Olsen et al. (2010b) show that radical left parties reideologise once they return to the opposition after participating in government coalitions. Independent of the context and specific circumstances of each coalition, radical left parties realise that diluting their radicalism and compromising for the sake of the continuation of a centre-left government always, without exception, bears a significant cost. AKEL itself attempted this, albeit half-heartedly in 2013 when it returned to opposition, coming out against the Troika and supporting even the exit from the eurozone. Nevertheless this was and was seen as largely hypocritical failing to convince its own members and supporters let alone the wider society – this could have been done with credibility only in 2012, proposing a new radical programme and resorting to early elections instead of entering into negotiations with the Troika. After all even if it lost, the political and electoral defeat would have been temporary as it could return
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to opposition with its image less tarnished with its support base less disillusioned and with the potential to reinvigorate itself politically and organisationally; instead it opted for the slow, seemingly safer, short-termist path of waiting the end of its tenure and trying to avert the worse with little success in a continuously shrinking frame of possibilities.

It seems that a Cypriot left in government was not doomed to fail in the dire straits of these tense times. It certainly was not doomed to fail in the badly manner that it did and to inflict upon itself such a heavy damage. More importantly it did not fail because it was too radical or too offensive in its discourse and politics – it failed because it was not radical enough and because it restricted itself to an essentially defensive role. Not only it refrained from challenging the existing system, not only it avoided a confrontation with the political power centres of the establishment but it refused to do the least expected from a left-wing force – to appeal to society and mobilise wider social strata in order to promote, sustain and ultimately enforce progressive social change. The economic crisis and the aggressiveness of the right were undoubtely significant parameters in the contextual setting – nevertheless they cannot explain and justify AKEL’s performance just as its own narcissism cannot overshow and absolve AKEL from its political responibilities in regard to the current state of the Cypriot working class and lower strata.

AKEL in government proved weak and hesitant, while the continuity in the party’s political strategy proved ineffective. A more effective strategy did not require a major turn in the party’s teleological vision or official ideology and policy. Rather it required an adjustment in
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political approach and the party’s relation with its environment. In retrospect, the distinction between revolutionary and reformist attitudes that has been haunting leftists for decades in their discussions as to whether participation should be pursued in the first place, proves too wide and general for the case of the Cypriot left. It is a procedurally narrower and tactics-related differentiation between radicalisation and continuing minimal reformism that can best capture the situation.

The Cypriot case rings the bell among radicals that pragmatism and defensive political positioning are not recipes for gradual social change or electoral success that can, in turn feed into social change. On the contrary the experience from Cyprus shows that appeasing the reactionary power centres and pleading for their understanding and tolerance can in fact harden them as they read this as political weakness. Compromise and political diplomacy in an attempt to avoid a right-wing government often seems to constitute the best option in the short-term, but it proves to be an unwise one in the medium term. Acting and being seen alike the other bourgeois parties bears a cost for a left wing political force – the distance from society increases and this in combination with a bad communicational stance can lead into cumulative social, political and electoral damage.

The case of AKEL can be especially paradigmatic for parties like SYRIZA, which is hoping to enter government as the main party, rather than simply as a minor coalition partner. The situation in Greece and Cyprus is very similar in many ways, not least because both countries have been for some time now implementing austerity measures imposed upon them by their
lenders. Repeating those of AKEL’s mistakes that relate to factors present in Greece as well – such as, participating in the choirs demonising civil servants and unwillingness to discuss options that are truly alternative to remaining in the ESFS – is highly likely to be disastrous. At the least, conversing on terms that are foreign to the left’s identity fails to change public opinion, shift the political hegemony to the left or change power relations in society. Converging on dominant narratives appears to result in trying to convey a ‘yes but’ vision that is neither distinct nor convincing. When the opposition is strong and aggressive enough such a vision can get across to voters as amateur mimicking of neoliberal proposals.

This seems to be the case with the recent defeat of Norway’s red-green coalition, dubbed by commentators as Europe ‘most leftists government’. As Wahl and Pedersen (2013) argue, ‘Nothing suggests that there is a growing demand for more right-wing policies in Norway’. Indeed, the red-green coalition, which included Norway’s Socialist Left Party (which throughout their eight years in office steadily lost support and is now marginally above the 4 per cent electoral threshold), gradually veered towards a soft neoliberalism that eventually included an extensive commercialization of nursery schools, reform of the pension system, fisheries and agriculture, cooperation with the World Bank and IMF and participation in the wars of Afghanistan and Libya (Wahl and Pedersen 2013; Wahl 2010).

If Bale and Dunphy’s (2011, 501) interview-based conclusion that radical left parties,
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‘are fully aware that government participation may involve painful policy compromises and even short-to-medium term electoral losses; but ... they see no credible alternative to government participation and regard its promise of increased legitimacy and the potential to influence policy away from a more right wing course as worthwhile compensatory goals’

holds, then, in view of AKEL’s (and for that matter, the Norwegian Socialist Left’s) performance, a fully-fledged reconsideration of their overall strategy is in order.

Finally, AKEL’s organizational structure, the same one that had for decades sustained high cohesion levels and prevented meaningful criticism from the inside, limited vigorous debate within the party on policy alternatives and thus prevented the party base from contributing at all to government policy. This lack of debate, the constrains placed on trade unions in favour of institutional dialogue and the focus placed on voters and not members were all contributing factor to the party being out of touch with the radical aspects of its identity. The story of the Norwegian Socialist Left Party has, again, been similar on this dimension as well. As Wahl (2011, 172) put it: ‘This lack of roots in the social movements and in the social struggle has been the main weakness of this party. The building of alliances with social movements outside parliament is therefore also non-existent’ (see also Keith 2014). Concurrently, therefore, the political cannot and must not be left to replace the social. Organisational matters remain crucial. The subsiding of grass-roots activity, societal mobilization and everyday propaganda during incumbency can only hurt the true and objective potential that resides in left radicalism. The left should always remember that to effect progressive political change it
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takes much more than political alliances and leadership manouevring; leftists both within and outside of government are expected to challenge the existing social, political and economic status quo.

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Endnotes

i The ten-year tenure of the right-wing government that was defeated in the elections of 2003 and was still fresh in people’s minds; the Cyprus problem negotiations that had reached a stalemate; the differences of Christofias’ electoral programme from those of the other two main candidates, such as its references to educational reform.

ii To Vima (2009).

iii Loizou (2012).

iv Although it must be noted that, in terms of the number of votes, Anastasiades was elected to office with less actual votes than Christofias.

v Certain topics that have a historical and ideological significance in radical left circles, such as the dictum of insurrection versus gradualism have been overshadowed by the contingencies arising out of the radical left’s internal fragmentation and poor electoral fortune in the past two decades. In Daniel Finn’s words, ‘There remain topics that have understandably fallen off the agenda of Europe’s radical left after the intense controversies of earlier decades, concerning the nature of the bourgeois-democratic state and the strategies that can be adopted by socialists operating in the heartlands of advanced capitalism. The possibility of exercising power—whether through the ballot box or an insurrectionary general strike—has been so remote over the past two decades that such questions were bound to suffer neglect. Yet they remain of fundamental importance’ (Finn 2012).
To address these questions, our main focus in this essay is inevitably left party agency and its strategic choices within a changing structure, rather than the specification of the exact linkage mechanisms between agency and structure through a macro-historical analysis.

At least two orientations define the party’s left wings and draw their ideological inspiration from Greece’s left; the KKE and SYN’s left currents, respectively.

For an overview of this argument, see Charalambous (2013); see also Olsen, Koss and Hough (2010a); Bale and Dunphy (2007); Thompson (1977).

AKEL’s involvement in clientelist politics goes back more than 20 years, nevertheless, it reached its peak and underwent public scrutiny, once the party officially occupied executive posts.

The percentage of the full time equivalent number of persons working in the primary sector dropped from 38.4% in 1973 to 8.9% in 1999 while the corresponding increase in the tertiary sector was from 35.8% in 1973 to 68.9% in 1999 (Labour statistics, 2004, 32). Foreign workers increased from 26,398 in 2000 to 57,460 third country nationals and 83,387 EU nationals in 2009. (Labour statistics 2005, 60 and IOM, 2010).

The main trade unions in the private sector are PEO, which is affiliated to AKEL, and SEK, which is affiliated to the centre and right, and covers a significant part of the semi-governmental sector as well. PASYDY, the main trade union of the public sector proper, and ETYK, of the bank employees, are nominally independent but oriented towards the centre-right.

The first wave of immigrant labour beginning in the early 1990s (and continuing until the early 2010s) came from eastern Europe, South East Asia and the Middle East under the status of guest workers with five year permits and taking up low paid and menial jobs rejected by Cypriots whose living standard was improving. The second wave in the late 1990s was composed mainly by Pontians and Georgians with Greek(EU) passports, a significant proportion of whom despite difficulties and tensions managed to become relatively integrated in the Cypriot society. The third wave post 2004 came from EU countries (mostly eastern ones and Greece). Today EU nationals alone make up as much as a quarter of the labour force and together with third country nationals constitute probably more than a third of the labour force in Cyprus.

Largely because of the boom in the service sector, itself due to Cyprus's special economic relations with Russia, the EU and EMU entry.

It is based on the processes of capitalist globalisation, transnationalisation of banking operations and deregulation of financial services, involving diversification and product innovation, concentration and consolidation through merges and acquisitions, and leading into increased volatility and instability as the main characteristics of the global economy. See Strange (1996); Tombazos (2010).

In spite of the presence of a social democratic party in Cyprus (EDEK) and its support for another candidate, the Party of European Socialists declared enthusiastically its support for Christofias in the second round of the election and continuously thereafter.

An explosion that caused the destruction of the island’s biggest power station, and cost the lives of 13 people.

The screams of right-wing MP Giorgos Georgiou on live radio, ‘These incompetent people have destroyed the country’ was expressive of what followed for the rest of the summer.

The measures of the third austerity package in December 2011 included a general freeze of all wages in the broader public sector, a 10% wage decrease to all newcomers in the broader public sector (also affecting all those on temporary contracts upon their renewal), a series of small increases on the contribution of public sector workers to various state and social insurance funds, a general temporary and scaled contribution on all wages including the private sector, an increase of 2% on VAT, a tax increase of 3% on income from dividend. These
were accompanied with the re-examination of all state benefits with a view to their reduction through the introduction of income criteria, the offering of subsidies to business for the employment of unemployed persons, the offering of tax incentives to business for infrastructural investments, reduction of public sector spending, offering state guarantees to small and medium businesses for securing loans and simplifying licensing procedures in the attempt to “fight bureaucracy”.

For example, on 19 November 2011, Charavgi’s headline read, ‘Salary Freeze in the Public Sector (for two years)’, praising the measures and the minister’s ‘decisiveness’ (Charalambous and Christophorou 2013: 143).

Since AKEL neither had nor recently developed a theory of monopoly capitalism as foundation of policy and political strategy, its antagonism against the banks does not amount to much beyond populist rhetoric.

This issue is discussed with examples in Charalambous and Christophorou (2013).

The attempt for educational reform had started in 2004 with the entry of Cyprus into the EU but really it gained its momentum in 2008 when the Left assumed the heading of the government. The new Minister’s directive for the cultivation of “a culture of peaceful co-existence” with a view to the reunification of the country and curriculum revision in the politically sensitive subjects of Greek literature, religious instruction and especially history teaching was heatedly resisted by a broad conservative nationalist alliance including the leadership of the teachers’ trade unions, politicians from all the parties except AKEL and the Archbishop himself, forcing AKEL and then the Minister himself to retreat in order to have at least the rest of the educational reform concluded.

Although the proposed land tax reform of 2010 aimed at a minority of big landowners, it was not well thought out, not accompanied by a broader effort to update and reorganise the Land Registry data base in order to deal with current and future land tax evasion and most importantly not adequately presented as a wealth redistribution measure and argued for as a means of taxing the rich in the public sphere in order to gather the necessary support among a public opinion that overwhelmingly supported the slogan of “taxing wealth”. The bill was eventually rejected by the other parties which argued that it would block economic development. An analogous story was repeated in the end of 2012 in the context of the Memorandum austerity legislation – in fact the land tax reform was the only Memorandum law whose voting was postponed.

Panayiotou makes the case of modernisation explicitly, arguing that not only the Cypriot left, but more generally the Left ‘can be defined as the political-cultural movement which claims to be the embodiment of the emancipatory potential of modernity’. Panayiotou (2006, 268).
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