Travelling against the Tide: The Cypriot Communist Left in the Post-1990 Era

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Travelling against the Tide: The Cypriot Communist Left in the Post-1990s Era

YIANNOS KATSOURIDES
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ABSTRACT The article focuses on the Cypriot communist party, AKEL, in the post-1990s era. The analysis centres on two processes and their impact upon two types of results. The two processes scrutinised are: (a) the party’s pattern of change and adaptation as this was guided by its strategic decision to redefine and, at the same time, maintain its pivotal role within the political and party systems of Cyprus and (b) its governing aspirations and participation. The interest lies in the effects of these processes on (a) the party’s electoral success and (b) its radical character. Electoral, the process of change rendered AKEL probably the most successful party within the European communist party family. The party also succeeded in preserving its peculiar radical identity. Nevertheless, this identity is under constant threat, not least because the party decided to pursue a governing strategy within the EU framework. When analysing the process of party adaptation, the sui generis character of AKEL comes to the fore, reminding us that politics seems always to be largely context dependent.

KEY WORDS: AKEL, Cyprus, radical left, communist parties, party change, Europeanisation, governmentalism

The dissolution of the socialist regimes has been shattering for the communist parties in Europe, even if the impact on them has been uneven and resulted in different responses (March 2008, p. 5, March and Mudde 2005, p. 27, Bell 1993, pp. 10–11). Those parties that remained faithful to socialism suffered a huge decline in their membership and electoral influence, which threatened their very survival (Katz and Mair 1992, p. 335). Cyprus offers the case of a seminal paradox in this regard. The communist party in the country, Anorthotikó Kómma Ergazómenou Laóú (Progressive Party of the Working People (AKEL)), has followed an exceptional upward electoral course during the years after the collapse of the ‘actually existing socialism’ and is justifiably described as ‘one of the most unusual and interesting parties in Europe’ (Dunphy and Bale 2007, p. 129).

Even more intriguingly, AKEL represents the only communist party in the European Union (EU) that holds the executive through its former leader, Demetris
Christofias. The party’s crosscurrent development necessitates further academic interest on the topic and requires an analysis of the party’s own course of change. One line of explanation looks to historical justifications rooted in the anchoring of the party in the working class and the poorer strata of the population (Katsourides 2009). A second relates to the party’s capability for adaptation and change and focuses on its ideological selectivity. While both claims are valid, this article will focus on the latter: AKEL’s specific pattern of ideological and organisational change, the way this was brought forward through a combination of defensive and offensive strategies, and its impact on the party’s radical identity and electoral returns.

The same lines of explanation were also advanced by Dunphy and Bale (2007) and Charalambous (2007). Dunphy and Bale emphasised how the party’s generic factors, that is, the positive impact of AKEL’s origins and development as well as leadership skills, and the special circumstances of a small divided island, have laid the context for the party’s organisational and ideological flexibility, thus explaining AKEL’s success. Charalambous addresses the same topics, differentiating between the internal and external reasons that kept AKEL’s electorate intact. He argues that AKEL’s reliance on activism, instead of theory, has proved the crucial factor in the party remaining an important political actor.

My current investigation, while drawing unavoidably on the same debates, moves one step further by considering AKEL’s aspirations of participating in governing coalitions. This has become apparent in AKEL’s strategy since the early 2000s and is something that previous studies have not addressed. My purpose is twofold: First, I aim to reflect on two processes – the party-sponsored initiatives for change, which included strategies for organisation, ideology, campaigning and positioning on the EU issue on the one hand, and office-seeking on the other. Second, I will assess the impact of these processes upon two types of results: AKEL’s electoral success and its radical identity.

The ‘policy-office-vote’ framework provides a helpful perspective in assessing the party’s strategic choices which led it to seize the various opportunities it had to influence national politics. Once a party decides to decisively influence political life, it must give priority to office-seeking goals, which leads to the need for vote maximisation, both of which, in turn, lead to de-emphasising policy objectives consistent with its ideology (Olsen et al. 2010, p. 11). This type of analysis employs an effort to classify AKEL within the communist and/or radical left parties’ universe. To this end, a number of approaches have been proposed (Olsen et al. 2010, pp. 5–7). March and Mudde (2005, p. 25) defined the radical left as one that rejects the underlying socioeconomic structure of contemporary capitalism and its values and practices and continues to advocate for alternative economic and power structures, involving a major redistribution of resources from the existing social and political elites. My analysis draws on this definition. My main argument is that while the processes described above have exerted a significant mitigating effect on AKEL’s communist identity, the party has, at least until now, managed to maintain its distinct radical character.

Following Bosco (2001, pp. 331–334), the concept of party adaptation is utilised to deal with the changes initiated by the party. These changes have paved the way for opening the structure of party competition for the executive since both dimensions for achieving democratic legitimacy were met: the subjective (the party’s own
initiatives for change) and the objective (whether the other parties perceived the change). Analysis is, therefore, conducted within the paradigm of parties both as independent and dependent variables/actors within the political system. This line of analysis places significant emphasis on the institution of political parties *per se* (Luther and Muller-Rommel 2002, p. 6, Mair 1997, p. 89, Sartori 1990, p. 178). Parties, in this regard, are considered to be purposive actors and in a position to shape at least some of the parameters within which they operate. This is more applicable to the parties to the left of mainstream social democracy, which Dunphy (2004) describes as ‘transformatory’ parties.

AKEL’s strategic choices in the form and mode of change are best explained by its own history and Cyprus’ particular political system. Both factors worked favourably for the party’s efforts at repositioning itself. Unlike other communist parties in Southern Europe (Bosco 2001), AKEL had never really acted as an anti-systemic party. The size of the party, its long practice of coalition building, especially at the local level, and its support for the centrist presidents of Cyprus (Table 1) have differentiated AKEL in this respect and rendered it an influential political actor. However, it was considered to be anti-regime by the other political forces and never really accepted as an equal government partner. It was excluded from cabinet participation, being viewed rather as a vote carrier. Changing this perception of the party as an extra-systemic actor in the aftermath of the 1990 diluvial events was considered crucial for survival, success and, consequently, the exercise of power. Three interrelated processes provided the context for party change and adaptation:

(a) The collapse of the socialist bloc posed a serious identity crisis for communist parties worldwide (Bosco 2001, p. 329) and deprived AKEL of a concrete project to substantiate its socialist vision. Harmel and Janda (1994, p. 265) argue that the most dramatic changes occur when a party experiences an external shock and they cite the fall of the Berlin Wall as one such experience for the communist parties.

(b) The accession process of Cyprus to the EU: The EU issue has always been an area in which the stake for parties on the left is high, not least because they have historically opposed its formation and workings. AKEL has always advised against membership, conceptualising the EU as a form of an advanced capitalist integration process that threatened both the achievements of the left at the national level and

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Candidate supported by the party</th>
<th>Election year</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Relation of the candidate to the party</th>
<th>Cabinet responsibility</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I. Clerides</td>
<td>1960</td>
<td>33.13</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Makarios, (elected)</td>
<td>1968</td>
<td>96.26</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Makarios, (elected)</td>
<td>1973</td>
<td>Only candidate</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S. Kyprianou (elected)</td>
<td>1978</td>
<td>Only candidate</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S. Kyprianou (elected)</td>
<td>1983</td>
<td>56.54</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G. Vassiliou (elected)</td>
<td>1988</td>
<td>51.63</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G. Vassiliou</td>
<td>1993</td>
<td>49.69</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G. Iakovou</td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>49.18</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T. Papadopoulos (elected)</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>51.51</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D. Christofias (elected)</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>53.37</td>
<td>Leader</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source:* Author’s compilation of data.
also future radical ambitions (AKEL 1986, pp. 105–107, 1990a, p. 101). However, left political parties are clearly influenced and motivated by many factors besides history and have responded in a wide range of ways to key questions regarding the EU.

(c) The prospect of governing: The question of strategy or ‘roads to power’ for the communist parties has been a matter of controversy since the days of Marx as has been the question of whether to participate in government. In his study of 34 non-ruling communist parties worldwide, Rice (1973, p. 607) identified AKEL as one of the likely exceptions to an otherwise firm projection that most legal communist parties had no prospect of gaining power either alone or in coalition with other parties. His prediction was realised 35 years later. However, once in office, more existential dilemmas arose.

This country-based case study draws on qualitative instruments of analysis: Records of official party congresses, electoral manifestos and other party documents were analysed over a time period extending from 1986 to 2010, while four semi-structured interviews with leading party cadres are also drawn upon in my discussion of the effects of the changes on AKEL’s character and organisation. I will begin by introducing some background information about the historical course of the party and the political and party systems of Cyprus in order to place the discussion in context, before turning to the strategic responses of the party and their effects on AKEL’s character and electoral returns.

The Party and the Party System

Two features distinguish the history of AKEL from the majority of communist parties in Europe: the size of the party (Table 2) and the island’s colonial past. Founded in 1926 as the Communist Party of Cyprus (CPC), AKEL is the oldest party on the island. It claimed a stake in society by being what Katz and Mair (1995, p. 10) called the instrument of the political ‘outs’, for whom it offered access to political structures. In 1941, the CPC was rebranded as AKEL in order to escape colonial proscription, making, at the same time, a conscious choice of being a mass party organisation, as this was described by various scholars (Duverger 1954, Katz and Mair 1993, p. 603, Gunther 2005, p. 258), highly integrated in society.

Table 2. AKEL’s participation in parliamentary elections (1960–2011)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Parliamentary election year</th>
<th>Votes</th>
<th>Seats</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AKEL</td>
<td>1960</td>
<td>51,719</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>42.9(^1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AKEL</td>
<td>1970</td>
<td>68,229</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>34.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AKEL</td>
<td>1976</td>
<td>148,769</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>64.90(^1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AKEL</td>
<td>1981</td>
<td>95,364</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>32.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AKEL</td>
<td>1985</td>
<td>87,628</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>27.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AKEL- Left New Forces</td>
<td>1991</td>
<td>104,771</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>30.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AKEL- Left New Forces</td>
<td>1996</td>
<td>121,958</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>33.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AKEL- Left New Forces</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>142,648</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>34.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AKEL- Left New Forces</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>131,066</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>31.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AKEL- Left New Forces</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>132,163</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>32.67</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Christophorou and Xadjikiriakos (1996) and author’s compilation of data.
The cornerstone of the party’s democratic integration strategy and electoral success relied on four pillars (Kolokasides, interview): (a) its accession to the peaceful or electoral ‘road to power’, (b) the alliances pursued with the political forces and personalities of the centre and the centre-right, (c) the conceptualisation of the left in a way broad enough to include the vast majority of wage-earners, while, at the same time, appealing to the middle classes and (d) the leading role of AKEL in claiming political and social rights for the working and middle classes. This strategy passed through various stages and led to high electoral performance and participation in election winning coalitions at the local level from the 1940s onwards.

AKEL’s view of the left as a broad mass movement of the working class and other underprivileged strata in society, of which the party is the backbone, was reflected in its organisational structure in the form of a series of concentric cycles with the party at its heart – the outer, associated parties include the largest trade union of Cyprus Pancyprian Federation of Labour (PEO), while auxiliary youth United Democratic Youth Organisation (EDON), farmers’ Union of Cypriot Farmers (EKA) and women’s Pancyprian Federation of Women’s Organisations (POGO) organisations were established in the 1940s. Together with the party base groups and the cultural and athletic associations, which are present in every community and village in the country, they provide AKEL with a strong mechanism for mobilisation. An anti-capitalist, anti-EU and anti-NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) posture, anti-nationalist sentiments and close relations with the Turkish Cypriot community have all characterised the party’s political identity.

Electorally, the party is cited as the main exception to a broader course of left parties declining electoral support in the post-1990s period (March and Mudde 2005, p. 28). AKEL is the only communist party that continues to dominate the political left in an EU member-state and constantly polls more than 30 per cent. In addition, the party leader, Christofias, was elected President of the House of Representatives in 2001 (the first high public office ever assumed by the party) and President of the Republic in 2008. Its social support was based on national rather than international politics, despite its warmth towards the Soviet Union. The absence of a socialist party on the island before 1969 and the current ineffectiveness of the social democratic United Democratic Union of the Centre (EDEK) have minimised the danger from the centre-left, while the lack of an extremist left party has deflected any risks to its left flank.

AKEL’s politics unfold in political and party environments historically conducive to its peculiar integration in the system. The historic residue of colonialism and nation building contributed to a perennial fragmentation of right-wing political forces until the founding in 1976 of the Democratic Rally (DISY – Dimokratikos Sinagermos), which has proved enduring and all-encompassing. In contrast, the left of the ideological spectrum was united and dominated by AKEL. In the markedly polarised climate after the National Organisation of Cypriot Fighters (EOKA) armed struggle (1955–59), which the communists opposed, AKEL was excluded from the ‘inner party system’, a group of parties that collaborate and define the terms of competition so as to exclude their opponents from power (Bosco 2001, p. 332). However, the political marginalisation of AKEL did not lead to electoral failure (Table 2).
The political system of the country was reconstructed after independence in 1960. The constitution of the Republic provides for a clear separation of powers. Executive power is exercised by the President, who is not held accountable to the Parliament. Therefore, until recently, changes in parliamentary elections had limited impact on the government. The President’s direct election by the people imposes on the political parties the need to seek alliances since no party can break the 50 per cent threshold on its own. The most crucial determinant of these alliances has diachronically been the Cyprus problem, which has dictated the entire political life of the island and caused a chain of developments: sporadic violence, high levels of politicisation (Christophorou 2007, p. 114), the relative atrophy of civil society and the consequent supremacy of political parties (Mavratsas 2003, p. 121). In addition, it has distorted political competition since political alliances have diachronically been based on the national issue at the expense of the parties’ ideological and political characteristics.

The island’s democratic consolidation came at a high price in the aftermath of the violent events of 1974, which forced all the political parties to reach a democratic consensus. The Greek junta-led coup and the Turkish invasion and occupation contributed to the isolation and discredit of the right-wing DISY in the years that followed because it gave shelter to those that supported the coup. This enabled AKEL to pursue an all-embracing strategy towards the centre-right Democratic Party (DIKO – Dimokratiko Komma) and the socialist EDEK, which was labelled the ‘alliance of the democratic forces’, to achieve programmatic agreements and to secure ministerial portfolios to non-members. In effect, the party’s democratic integration strategy, since independence, assumed the form of influencing the government, rather than exercising power.

The party system consolidated after 1976 with the domination of four parties (AKEL, EDEK, DIKO and DISY), which held more than 90 per cent of the votes. Other smaller parties did not manage to break this pattern until the mid-1990s, when, among other factors, proportional representation (1995) and voting for 18-year-olds (1997) were introduced. Parliamentary elections were held under the majority system until 1981, when qualified proportional representation was introduced with a threshold of 8 per cent. This institutional form of engineering has subserved the consolidation of the party system that emerged after 1976, as minority groups were essentially deterred from entering the Parliament.

The left and the right poles each command one-third of the vote, a circumstance which renders the left-right cleavage dominant. Despite small changes in electoral influence, continuity in vote patterns has been the most striking feature of parliamentary elections in Cyprus (Christophorou 2007, pp. 120, 123). This is also attributed to the rather strong partisan identification of the Cypriot voters, which is usually inherited through their families. Indications of party de-alignment are looming, however. Abstention rates reached a massive 41 per cent in the Euro-elections of 2009 and 21.3 per cent in the 2011 parliamentary elections, compared to 3.03 per cent in 1996, 4.19 per cent in 2001 and 11 per cent in 2006.

Strategic Responses: Survival Strategies (1): Pragmatism and Eclecticism

The environmental stimulus posed by the dissolution of the socialist camp was not the sole motive for change. AKEL experienced a huge internal crisis in the second half of the 1980s with both the party ideology and the most suitable party model
being at stake. The crisis was initiated by the electoral defeat in 1985 and was supplemented by the repercussions of perestroika. It was intensified by the fact that it coincided with a change in leadership. The upheaval ended with the prevailing of the orthodox communist line (and candidate) and the departure of the internal opposition from the party. These last included some of the most influential figures of the left at the time; they went on to form a new party (A.D.I.S.O.K. – Ananeotiko Dimokratiko Sosialistiko Kinima), which proved short-lived, but the affair proved that even within parties of democratic centralism, such as AKEL, conflict and factionalism do occur from time to time, providing support for the argument that parties are not singular, coherent actors (Daalder 1983, p. 2, Mair 1983, p. 407).

The external stimulus and the internal crisis provided the context for the party’s initiatives, which had put it in a state of readiness, able to receive shocks and react opportunely. Changes embraced alterations in party rules, policies, strategies and tactics that enabled the party to overcome the subjective threshold to legitimacy. At the same time, the changes raised a perpetual question regarding the communist character of the party. The changes aimed: (a) to reposition AKEL in the political and party systems of Cyprus in a way that would escape political ghettoisation and allow it to be viewed as an acceptable political actor and (b) to preserve the party’s radical identity and vision for socialism.

The AKEL Congress of 1990 is considered seminal. The party adopted a new ideological manifesto entitled ‘Our Perception of Socialism’ (AKEL 1990b). The underpinning elements of the changes were eclecticism and pragmatism. Ideology was instrumentally treated in a way to suit a variety of circumstances and different target groups. The party rejected some features of the Soviet model, especially those that limited democracy (i.e. Stalinism) and skewed the development of the economy. Other traits such as the social and workers’ achievements were acknowledged as significant contributions to the working class movement worldwide. In addition, the document emphasised the historically positive role of AKEL in Cypriot society and asked the people to judge the party on its own merit and not through the prism of ‘real socialism’.

The enduring ‘national problem’ of Cyprus laid the bedrock for the party’s pragmatism. AKEL has always conceptualised the solution of the Cyprus problem in an anti-NATO context. However, the need to deal with Western supremacy in the South-East Mediterranean region dictated a peculiar modus vivendi with other centre-right political forces, which tempered the party’s ideological stance. The Cyprus problem was always placed over and above any radical ambitions. This was even more explicit in the post-1990s era. AKEL reaffirmed its positioning as a ‘national’ political force in the service of all people. By playing down its class nature and purposes, it was easier for the party to introduce changes that were deemed necessary for mere survival, to form alliances and thus to remain a powerful political actor. A combination of internal and external responses was employed in applying the new zeitgeist.

**Internal Changes (1): Organisation**

Organisational changes were designed: (a) to enhance internal democracy and membership involvement in critical political decision-making at all levels of party organization and (b) to render the party structure more flexible and able to adapt to the changing environment. To achieve these goals, a string of changes was launched (AKEL 1990a, pp. 10–11). Forms of consultation by members (e.g. advisory offices), along with
representative fora or electoral assemblies, were introduced. Secret voting was established for intra-party elections, candidates for public offices would be recommended by party cells and nominated by district assemblies. A ceiling of three tenures on some public offices (e.g. MPs) was also introduced (AKEL 2005). Public debate by members in party cells and through the party press was inaugurated and has taken place before Congresses ever since. Party base units were set up in residential areas as well as in workplaces to adjust to the changing social conditions of Cyprus.

As a result, AKEL managed to resist the trend towards declining party membership. Despite the loss of 200 party members during the period of internal upheaval, AKEL enlisted 735 new members at around the same time (AKEL 1990a, p. 9). Figures extracted from the party’s latest Congress documents indicate a small increase in the number of members to 14,752 (AKEL 2010b, p. 2) and a 6 per cent increase compared to the number of members in the 20th Congress. This is a significant proportion with reference to the party’s total votes (ranging from 104,471 to 142,648 in this 22-year period). However, bearing in mind the increase in the total electorate since then and the extension of the franchise in 1997 to include 18-year-olds, it indicates an overall decrease.

The direct impact of organisational changes on the party’s ideological character was negligent. The organisational structure of AKEL has not changed substantially, maintaining its Leninist character, with the party’s Congress remaining the highest authority and democratic centralism its founding principle. Those aspects of democratic centralism that would protect it from external effects (e.g. careful selection of members) and internal ‘irregularities’ (e.g. preventing ranking of the candidacies for the Central Committee) have remained intact. In addition, membership in the Central Committee is hugely weighted towards party officials and employees or affiliates of the various auxiliary organisations. The party maintains a strong organisation machine, which resembles what Althusser (1979, p. 26) called a ‘machine for domination’.

Indirectly, however, the positive effects of these changes on membership figures and involvement during the first years were later supplanted by structural ineffectiveness in some aspects of party organisation (Alecou, interview). Low rates of participation, decreasing contributions in public debates, dual mandates in internal bodies, and retardation in internal decision-making relating mostly to party initiatives, all point in this direction. One of the most worrying tendencies is the decline in active membership: The members’ presence in party-cell meetings has been on average 41 per cent in the last five years (AKEL 2010b, p. 3). Moreover, liberalisation of internal organisation has involved an opportunity cost in terms of lenience of control and the wane of self-discipline (AKEL 1994, p. 12). This has proved harmful to the party’s character over time since it implies a different motive for engaging in party affairs: Increasingly, members use the party to secure both elected and appointed state offices (Alecou, interview).

Internal Changes (2): Ideology

The ideological changes had two primary aims. Firstly, they aimed to reposition the party within the party system and to demonstrate its democratic credentials, thereby enhancing its capability to form coalitions. The most important modifications in this direction included the acceptance of multipartism and democratic succession in
power, the affirmation of its commitment to the democratic way to socialism, and the
declaration of the social democrats as strategic allies. A second set of ideological
alterations clearly indicated the efforts of the party to outline its own version of
socialism and included the separation of powers in the function of the state, the
doctrine of mixed economy, the acknowledgment of the need for diversity in socialist
development along with the multiformity of modes of ownership, and the
significance of human and democratic rights (AKEL 1990a, 1990b).

These changes, while indicating a visible shift towards classic social democracy,
differed from it on two important issues. Firstly, the party clearly distanced itself
from the governing social democratic parties and drew a clear line between the latter
and its own ideological stance (AKEL 1990b, p. 2). Secondly, AKEL maintained its
firm commitment to the transition to socialism as opposed to classical social
democracy. The party remains a Marxist-Leninist one (AKEL 1995a), which
envisions the transformation of society; class struggle is alive albeit in altered forms,
and relations with organised labour are recognised as a preferential area for the
party (AKEL 1990a, p. 106, 1995a, p. 34, 2000, p. 51). Under pressure for more
openness and fearing that the changes involved a risk to its ideological and political
unity and identity, a more persistent effort towards ideological indoctrination has
been highlighted as crucial ever since. The climax of this endeavour came in the 21st
Congress, which decided on the founding of an internal ideological school for
members and a research institute to deal with this deficit (AKEL 2010a, p. 48).

I ideological modifications were theorised in such a way as to ‘accommodate current
capitalist development and the particularities of the Cypriot economy and society’
(Charalambous 2007, p. 435). AKEL adhered to the view that the communists of each
country should independently determine their strategies and policies. By dismissing
Stalinism and combining Marxism-Leninism and social democratic theory, the party
managed to shake off the image of a hard-line communist party and appeal effectively
beyond its core supporters. The need for reform within the existing social system was
successfully coupled with the party’s transformatory vision.

Despite these changes, important aspects of continuity can be observed, mainly
with reference to the party’s continued attachment to organisational and rhetorical
schemes of the past. AKEL acknowledged that a sudden break with its own past
would result in an ideological and organisational plummeting, so the celebrations of
the birth date of the CPC in 1926, May Day and the anniversary of the Russian
Revolution are important symbols, offering and underlining a sense of continuity.
The party has positioned itself as a modernising force, albeit one with a proud
tradition on which the party’s leadership successfully draws as a resource rather than
as a constraint (Dunphy and Bale 2007, pp. 139, 142).

External Changes

This type of change relates to the party’s electoral appeal and the need to search for
new voters. For the party to comply with the pressures posed by the new and highly
competitive campaign environment and traditional working class constituency
modifications, strategic aspects of change were applied. Firstly, the party presented
its new electoral platform, AKEL-Left New Forces, in the 1991 elections (AKEL
1990a, p. 15), which put into practice the politics of ‘enlargement’: This was based on
the need to broaden the party’s appeal to the middle classes (AKEL 1990b, p. 10, 1995b, p. 35, 2000, p. 53) and recruit candidates outside the membership pool as well as widely known leftists.

In addition, within a time-span of two years, the party massively renewed its leadership and dropped the average age of the most important party organs. Thirteen of the 15 members of the Political Bureau elected in 1990 were first-time entrants with the average age of that body dropping from 65 years in 1988 to 45 in 1990. New entrants in the Central Committee numbered 47 out of a total of 100 (AKEL 1990c). The parliamentary team was drastically renewed in the 1991 elections, since 18 of the 19 MPs were elected for the first time. This generational turnover constituted a crucial tactical manoeuvre that gave added credibility to the party’s efforts to soften its image and position itself as a ‘rejuvenation force’. It also helped to convey the idea of change to the electorate.

Secondly, AKEL utilised cooperation with minor political groupings (e.g. with EPALXI (Bastion) and E.DH. – United Democrats) during the 2000s as part of its strategy to extend the party’s popular appeal. Thirdly, a new concept of campaigning was employed as a result of the new media environment in which indoor meetings and cultural events gradually replaced the mass rallies of the past and the leader himself was placed in a prominent position (Christophorou 2001, p. 107). A trend towards recourse to communication specialists was also identified despite the emphasis still placed on the party’s machinery and canvassing (Christophorou 2006, p. 527). Finally, the need to use new methods for penetrating civil society was indicated in order to promote the party’s policy (AKEL 1994, p. 24, 2010a, p. 43). In this respect, AKEL successfully picked up many of the ‘new agenda’ issues (e.g. environment, immigration).

As a result, the party increased its vote share in three consecutive elections before suffering a minor blow in 2006 (Table 2). Beyond the positive effects of these alterations on the party’s electoral performance, the commitment of the membership and the constituencies to the party itself played a crucial role in its success. Orbell and Fougere (1973, p. 450) indicate that few organisations can survive very long without loyalty to the organisation per se. The small size of Cyprus has definitely contributed to this end. Smaller states are characterised by a restricted electoral market and by the existence of dense organisational networks, which bond voters into a set of strong identities (Mair 1997, p. 168).

However, the party’s substantial electoral strength proved to be a taming influence, causing the party to de-emphasise its revolutionary exhortations and to concentrate instead on working class ‘bread and butter issues’ and on the improvement of the daily life of those attached to it either directly or indirectly. Practical and everyday politics took precedence over any discussions for transforming society. The most critical of all changes, though, was the change of the party’s position vis-à-vis the EU and the process of integration altogether, since it involved a major premise of the party’s ideological legacy and an important parameter of future coalition capability.

Survival Strategies (2): Critical Support to the EU

Marks et al. (2002) propose a frame of analysis according to which a party’s position towards the EU is evaluated against four possible explanations: ideological family, national context, voters’ position and party competition. They conclude that the best
predictor of a party’s position is ideology. They also propose a categorisation of the various party families and their anticipated positions. In this respect, communist parties strongly oppose economic and political integration. This seems to fit the AKEL case well in the pre-1995 era, when the issue of the EU was encapsulated solely within its established communist ideology. While ideology definitely remains a crucial reference point, national context and party competition better explain the party’s position in the post-1995 era.

In 1995, the party turned in favour of Cyprus’ accession course, while retaining its overall assessment of the EU as a capitalist form of integration (AKEL 1995c, pp. 41–44). The decision was grounded in strategic considerations that related to: (a) the party’s overall evaluation of European politics and the balance of power between social and political forces on the international and European levels and (b) the configuration of political forces and the mode of their competition at the national level. The driving forces for turning in favour of accession for Cyprus included: (a) the absence of any realistic alternatives after the collapse of the socialist bloc and the weak status of the Non-Alignment Movement, (b) the prospect that Cyprus’ European perspective could act as a cohesive lever to reunite Cyprus, (c) the overall positive public opinion concerning Cyprus-EU prospects (the AKEL constituency not excluded), which verifies studies indicating that ‘ideological orientations shift in response to shifts in the public opinion’ (Adams et al. 2004, p. 590) and (d) the fear of isolation, since all the other political forces were in favour of EU accession.

The rationale supporting AKEL’s change in position suggests that the handling of the EU issue and the resulting decision reflected more a strategic concern of the leadership about a policy issue that could threaten party survival and coalition potential, and less of an ideological shift. The shift in position was a matter not of choice, but of necessity. Commitment to Europe was also used in an instrumental way in order to legitimise a certain degree of break with the party’s ideological past. In the long term, the EU accession course and the harmonisation process has not proved damaging to AKEL either internally (i.e. through factionalism) or externally (i.e. in elections). In addition, the fact that no other party holds an anti-EU position, either on the left or the far right of the ideological spectrum, drives many EU opponents to find shelter in the more concerned approach professed by AKEL.

The paradigm of Euroscepticism (Taggart, 1998; Kopecky and Mudde, 2002), whose validity has been questioned especially for radical left parties (Dunphy, 2004, p. 7), can provide a useful insight with regard to the party’s and its competitors’ strategies. The danger of political isolation would have been looming over the party had it not changed its position, so the party softened its criticism of Europe in an effort to defend itself against allegations of holding a Eurosceptic stance and in order to become ‘coalitionable’. This term was used by Benedeto and Quaglia (2007) to describe a party’s ability to form coalitions. This line of explanation engages the strategic responses of parties to manipulate European integration issues to meet their goals (Scott 2001, p. 6, cited in Hooghe et al. 2002, p. 968).

The decision demonstrates once again the pervasive influence of the Cyprus problem on the party line, which in this case worked favourably for the party’s repositioning. The conscious downgrading of the class cleavage in the face of the ethnic/political one made it easier for the party to accede to the EU perspective than if ideology had been the sole driving force. The Cyprus problem proved a decisive
factor in persuading the majority of the party members to espouse the new line as well – a hard task nevertheless. When the issue was resolved during the 18th Party Congress, the party elite was predominantly in favour of altering the position, while the grass-roots members were more sceptical or opposed. The voting in the Congress resulted in a 60 to 40 per cent vote in favour of a positive stance towards the EU. Prior to presenting the issue before the Congress, the leadership decided to take advice from the entire party membership during cell meetings: The vote was 65.24 per cent in favour of the leadership position, 28.47 per cent voted against and 6.29 per cent of those present in the meetings abstained (AKEL 1995b).

Strategic considerations were the prime motive when the process for change was initiated. However, this process is an ongoing one and it provokes its own momentum with uncertain or ‘undesired’ outcomes that reflect on party ideology. The impact of Europeanisation is such an instance. Europeanisation hollows out competition and promotes consensus (Ladrech 2001, p. 5) and limits further the discretion available to parties and governments (Mair 1997, p. 133). In this regard, the impact of Europeanisation on political life in Cyprus is exemplified through the harmonisation process. Support from political parties after AKEL’s change of position was unanimous and a significant level of consensus was reached. As a result, out of the 620 bills concerning harmonisation presented by the end of 2002, 614 were passed unanimously (Katsourides 2003, p. 17). Although unanimity increases the stability of the political system, it simultaneously increases the perceived homogenisation of parties, thus erasing the distinctiveness of parties such as AKEL, which diachronically claim their difference as one of their most precious assets.

Europeanisation has exerted a significant influence on the party’s policies. AKEL’s U-turn was guided by its assertion ‘to fight the system from within’ – that is, to try and reform the EU into a democratic and worker-friendly institution. The party calls for a re-orientation of the EU along more interventionist lines and requests a re-definition of the ECB’s tasks so as to include growth and the fight against unemployment. This is reflected in the current party line, which favours a ‘social’ Europe in an effort to further the rights of labour, immigrants and other poor strata of society (AKEL 2009a). However, this position discloses a naïve outlook on the workings of the EU and the impact that the party (and the country) could have on the system. In addition, the process is twofold and could dictate policies that deviate from its popular character. For example, while AKEL continues to advocate against privatisation, it has for the first time accepted a government proposal for the privatisation of the national air carrier, Cyprus Airways (Simerini 3 February 2012). Furthermore, the party has accepted deregulation and EU enforced rises in value-added tax (VAT) as part of the harmonisation process, to name two instances of its policy deviations.

The party does not oppose the principle of a ‘political’ Europe either, although objections are obvious in the current and potential shape of ‘political’ Europe as described in the Constitutional and the Lisbon Treaties, which the party voted down for, among other reasons, the Treaty’s militarism and relations with NATO, and the lack of internal democracy (AKEL 2008b; 2009b). At the same time, however, the President of Cyprus and former party leader accepted the strengthening of EU-NATO relations in the European Council of December 2008.

The Europeanisation process also triggered organisational changes which fostered the development of relations with European institutions and other networks.
AKEL’s relations with the Party of the European Left (EL) demonstrates again the ambiguous impact of Europeanisation on the party. AKEL rejects full membership in the EL and retains observer status for two main reasons (Loukaides, interview). Firstly, AKEL opposes certain of the EL’s ideological and organisational principles (e.g. the right of movements and individuals to become members). Secondly, a potential EL membership, as it currently functions, inhibits unity among left parties because the biggest communist parties of Europe do not participate.

Relations with the Party of European Socialists (PES) are another instance of the mitigating effect of Europeanisation on AKEL. AKEL voted at variance with its fellow-travellers in GUE/NGL, in favour of the social democrats candidate, Martin Schulz, for the Presidency of the European Parliament (Haravgi 18 January 2012). In addition, President Christofias took part in the Leaders’ Conference of the PES and has agreed that his ministers will also attend these meetings during Cyprus’ presidency of the EU (Phileleftheros 12 February 2012). The need to enhance international solidarity and cooperation between communist and other left parties and the need to form alliances to help solve the Cyprus problem dictate AKEL’s participation in various networks and in various capacities, regardless of the involvement of other communist parties.

Changing its position on the EU was an integral part of AKEL’s survival strategy. Europeanisation may be seen as a response to the party’s long exclusion from national office and as a key element of a broader electoral strategy designed to convey the image of a party which is modern, credible and fit to govern. The future of the party, however, relied increasingly on the way its prospects for governing would be treated, given the fact that the influence of ideological objectives was diminishing. In addition, the time lag since the right-wing-led coup of 1974 had weakened anti-rightist feelings among the electorate and threatened to upset the long-lasting frame of political alliances that clearly placed DISY at a disadvantage.

**Offensive Strategies: Office-Seeking in the Service of Policy**

The most important challenge to AKEL’s identity came in the early 2000s, when the party turned from defensive strategies to offensive ones. The most prominent component of this new mentality was its aspiration to govern. This had already been underlined in 1995 when the party declared power sharing to be the guiding principle of any future alliance (AKEL 1995c). AKEL has always placed presidential elections in a strategic game of a step-by-step process of coming to power in a peaceful electoral way through alliances with other parties. This strategy is in line with the Leninist concept of stages of struggle and the estimation of the party’s leadership that social and political conditions had not been ready for a communist candidate to run for the presidency in previous years (Kolokasisides, interview). Therefore, the party had offered its support to centrist candidates without assuming any government office until 2003. The loss of the 1993 and 1998 presidential elections to the DISY candidate signalled the low point of the party’s influence in decision-making (Dunphy and Bale 2007, p. 137) and, at the same time, a more aggressive approach towards office-seeking.

AKEL’s adaptation through organisation, ideology and strategic transformations had enabled the party to reposition itself within the party system so that it would be considered a legitimate governing partner. As early as the 1996 municipal elections,
the party formed an alliance with EDEK; it did the same with DIKO in the 1998 presidential elections as a prelude to the three-party coalition that won the majority of the municipalities in the 2001 and 2006 local elections, and also in the presidential elections of 2003 in which the party assumed cabinet responsibility for the first time. The latter was AKEL’s first ever participation in government with four party nominated ministers. All these suggest that the party had successfully crossed the objective threshold to democratic legitimacy.

The party’s access to power in the coalition government under T. Papadopoulos (2003–08) was acknowledged as a milestone towards altering prevailing negative assumptions within society against it (AKEL 2005, p. 19). Participation in the cabinet was seen both as a vindication of the party’s alliances strategy and as a first step towards claiming power on its own (AKEL 2005, p. 25). There were important implications for the structure of party competition for the executive as well, which had been hitherto closed. According to Mair (1997, p. 191), a closed party system exists when the range of governing alternatives and the pattern of alternation is known in advance and some parties are permanently excluded from the executive. In the case of Cyprus, the pattern was limited outside the left’s political space. AKEL was treated, in practice, as an outsider.

Beyond the benefits usually associated with incumbency, the party’s participation in government resulted in grievances against it for not delivering what it had promised. These grievances were exacerbated after the referendum in April 2004, which saw Greek Cypriots rejecting the plan offered by the United Nations for the solution of the Cyprus problem, citing it as unjust and partial towards the Turkish side. This had a significant dividing influence among the party members and supporters, since strong views were held on both sides of the issue. The party reluctantly recommended a ‘no’ vote, a recommendation endorsed by a 65 to 35 per cent conference vote (Haravgi 15 April 2004). The referendum overshadowed the European Parliament elections held one month later. Despite the second order character attributed to these elections, AKEL’s percentage shrank to 27.89 per cent and lagged behind that of DISY. It was the party’s first real reversal after 1990. The slump was repeated in the 2006 parliamentary elections, with the party’s vote share slipping by 3.6 per cent.

Anticipation about forthcoming elections always bleeds back into governmental politics (Laver 2008, p. 534). AKEL’s decision to field its leader as a candidate and thus break its own tradition seems to reflect, in part, that principle. The party engaged in an effort to allay future electoral damage by triggering presidential aspirations among both its members and the electorate (AKEL 2005, p. 56). The party felt that the time was ripe to reverse its long-lasting policy for alliances and project its leader to head a government coalition (Kolokasides 2010, p. 151). Opinion polls during those years showed Christofias as the most popular leader in the country, thus nourishing the party’s ambition to claim power on its own (Table 3).

The party initiated an in-house process with discussions within party cells during May and June 2007: This consultative vote led to a Congress in July 2007 so that a decision could be reached. Christofias’ candidacy was supported by 80 per cent of the party membership and 85 members of the 100-member Central Committee (of the remaining members, 12 voted against and three abstained). A proposal was brought before the electoral Congress and Christofias’ candidacy was endorsed with a 92.7 per cent vote in favour (Haravgi 9 July 2007). During the campaign, it became
obvious that Christofias’ nomination served as a way to revive the party organisationally and programmatically.

Past participation in government and future expectations further influenced party positioning on European integration. While EU issues never proved decisive in elections, the cautious stance of the party towards the EU was thought to be a point of weakness. Therefore, the party’s radicalism on EU related issues was further limited both quantitatively (only two pages of the electoral manifesto) and qualitatively in an effort to defuse their salience in political debates (Christofias 2007a, pp. 21–22). Christofias toured EU institutions and European party groups with fruitful results (i.e. securing the support of the European socialists). This served as a powerful counter-balance to attempts to portray him as anti-European and to suggest that the European elites were distrustful of his candidacy. Previous handling of the EU issue and the change in position proved decisive in nullifying criticism against the party.

In a candidate-centred campaign underpinned by professional consulting, Christofias positioned himself as a candidate who could offer the flexible approach needed to end the rift that divided Cyprus. The communist candidacy was also grounded on the party’s ambition to increase its share of power and policy-making ability, rather than on the potential for systemic change or a drive for socialism. In AKEL’s view ‘governing must be pursued even if the preconditions for the implementation of a socialist programme do not exist’ (Kolokasides 2010, p. 149). In this way, the party has more opportunities to influence national policies. The traditional worker constituency of the party was mobilised as ‘consumers’, ‘taxpayers’ and ‘the poor’, and not as a class collectivity, while, in order to appease any concerns amongst business circles, a mixed economy was at the forefront of the campaign (Christofias 2007a, p. 39). Positions on internal government affairs did not go beyond the existing capitalist system, but they were directed in favour of the popular strata interests. This was sufficient for a successful campaign, but it placed the party’s identity at risk, as exemplified by a statement by Christofias that, if elected, the party and the President would only ‘administer the capitalist system’ (Christofias 2007b, pp. 23, 31).

### Table 3. Political leaders’ popularity (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Political leader</th>
<th>July 2005</th>
<th>February 2006</th>
<th>October 2007</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>D. Christofias (AKEL)</td>
<td>74.6</td>
<td>74.8</td>
<td>68.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M. Garoyian (DIKO)</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>50.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N. Anastasiades (DISY)</td>
<td>35.3</td>
<td>38.7</td>
<td>34.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y. Omirou (EDEK)</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>44.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G. Perdikis (Greens)</td>
<td>51.1</td>
<td>56.7</td>
<td>52.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D. Syllouris (EVROKO)</td>
<td>45.8</td>
<td>47.8</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Public opinion poll by Metron Analysis, conducted during 20–26 May 2008 for Alitheia newspaper.*

The Perils of Government: In Search of Identity

The most profound and historic result of the elections was the coming to power of a communist candidate for the first time in Cyprus’ electoral history. Arguably,
governing is a qualitatively and probably unavoidable new phase in a party’s lifespan (Olsen et al. 2010, p. 12). As we have seen, the process of party adaptation had served to ameliorate the implications of the dissolution of the socialist bloc and catalytically influenced the chances of party success in presidential elections. Christofias’ election served both to unlock the Cypriot party system and aggravate AKEL’s identity puzzle. At the heart of this dilemma is (a) the party’s constant need to avoid isolation and (b) maintaining a relationship between party and government in such a way that a distinct, radical identity is preserved for the party (AKEL 2008a). Both issues touch upon the ‘policy-office-vote’ trichotomy and the hard choice between them. This section discusses the impact of the changes and governing on AKEL’s core identity as well as the party’s own perspective.

Both at home and in the European domain, the party has been reluctant to launch radical proposals or solutions consistent with its ideology and its past. This reluctance is attributed to a number of considerations. Interviews with party officials (Stephanou, Kolokasides) reveal a well-entrenched perception that the social, political and international contexts within which party politics unfold inhibit fundamental changes to the existing social system. These structural limitations constrain the implementation of a more radical approach to governance as well. Cyprus’ small size, its dependency on the EU and its lack of global influence all highlight the international limitations placed upon the party. These deficits underline AKEL’s inability to alter the systemic variables of the capitalist system on its own. At the same time, however, this belief is at odds with the party’s justification – that of changing the system from within – for its shift of position on the EU issue.

Despite its role in Christofias’ incumbency, the most important of the domestic constraints is the unresolved Cyprus problem. Presenting a party candidacy in an environment free from the Cyprus problem would mean presenting a socialist project to the people that would probably be rejected and that would almost certainly result in the party’s marginalisation (Kolokasides, interview). Ironically, the fact that the party avoids bringing the issue of socialism before the electorate could be acknowledged as a significant contribution to the country in terms of sparing it from further divisions. However, it could also be viewed in another way – that the party deliberately and indefinitely postpones doing so because it realises that it will never enjoy the majority’s support. In this line of argument, the party is thought to be using the Cyprus problem in a masterly way in order to avoid ‘left criticism’ of its policies.

The party itself argues that the course it follows is consistent with its communist heritage and ideology (Stephanou, interview). It contends that Cyprus is currently going through a stage where the most pressing duty is to complete the country’s independence and solve the Cyprus problem. Ideological projects are sidelined and the real socialist perspective and positions are to be found in AKEL’s proposals for the reunification of the island. Within this context, the party is seeking a solution that would negate ethnic lines of division in the long term and set Cypriot society on a track of class-based politics. President Christofias’ proposals during the ongoing negotiations for a cross-voting system between the two communities and a unified economy point in this direction. There is press criticism (Politis 20 November 2011, Alitheia 13 November 2011), however, of both the President and AKEL to the effect that now that they are in power, they no longer want to solve the problem, at least not until a second term.
The political system of the country raises further obstacles for radical considerations and substantive institutional changes. The need for political alliances directly affects the political programme adopted by any candidate. Christofias’ manifesto for the presidency (2007) reflected this need and was put together in a dexterous manner to accommodate the divergent views of possible allies (i.e. political parties), avoid controversial issues (such as taxing the church’s business activities) and secure tolerance from domestic powerful actors (i.e. trade unions of government employees, banks, etc.). Moreover, since the highly disadvantaged (in social terms) are a minority in the total population, socialist and communist parties that participate in the electoral process must seek alliances with other groups if they are to achieve a majority in elections (Przeworski 1980). In doing so, they necessarily play down their working class discourse and develop issue positions acceptable to supporters of capitalism and the free market. This limits their capacity to develop and implement authentic socialist policies even if they are elected. The case of AKEL illustrates this amply.

The dependence on political alliances led to the circumstance that AKEL most feared – political isolation. The governing coalition, which had been formed in 2008, was dismantled and the President and AKEL have recently faced a hostile Parliament and an unfavourable public, especially after the explosion of a confiscated cargo of ammunition in a naval base in July 2011 (see polls in Phileleftheros 17 July 2011, Simerini 24 July 2011). Christofias and AKEL face a hard task in promoting their policies in an unfriendly environment and this could signal further de-radicalisation of their positions and create tension between them.

Tension was visible in the government bills for economic reforms in November 2011. Some of the proposed measures included a 2 per cent increase in the VAT – an indirect form of taxation that the party had traditionally opposed – and a freeze on wage increases for two years (Haravgi 19 November 2011). The party, initially, elegantly rejected the proposals and emphasised wealth taxation instead (Haravgi 20 November 2011), only to accept them a few days later, conceding that this compromise was beyond the party’s long-established positions (Secretary-General A. Kyprianou in Kathimerini, 19 February 2012). The above discussion reveals a detectable strain between party and government and raises the question of AKEL’s distinctiveness from the government. However, this is easier said than done. So far, the party has differentiated itself from the government only twice: first, when it voted against the Treaty of Lisbon (AKEL 2008b) and, second, when it voted down the new European Commission (February 2010). On both occasions, it was known in advance that the party’s negative vote would not affect the positive outcome.

Beyond political impediments, the party also pleads social considerations that restrain more radical proposals. A concrete, inborn conservatism in Cyprus society is invoked against changes to the status quo because they could trigger reactions from part of the electorate. The European Social Survey (ESS) (2009) revealed that Cyprus remains a deeply conservative society despite liberal flashes on issues such as women’s rights and environmentalism. Social conservatism is reflected principally in the deep sense of religiosity of the Cypriots (the highest score in the EU) and the xenophobic attitudes towards migrants. Religiosity has rendered the Church of Cyprus almost untouchable since many parties and members of the political elite on
the island are bound up in it. Proposals to impose a tax on the church’s business activities and profits have fallen by the wayside.

The changing social composition of the country’s population raises another factor that works against a possible ‘socialist agenda’. Class underpinnings of electoral behaviour have gradually weakened as a consequence of the altered nature of the class synthesis of the population (AKEL 1996). Salaried labour has increased significantly, according to the Statistical Service of Cyprus (2009, p. 32). However, the majority of salaried labour is no longer manual, nor is it found in high density places, such as factories, where, traditionally, left parties drafted members, activists and followers. The working class nowadays is mostly white collar, working in public and semi-public fields, in the banking sector and in small- to medium-sized service enterprises (72.5 per cent of the total earning population). The capacity to organise in these companies is very small since they are scattered all over Cyprus.

The changes in the class composition of the population suggest an alteration in the character of political parties and, most profoundly, in class-based parties such as AKEL. AKEL seems to be confronted with the dilemma faced by many communist parties that have pursued the goal of winning votes in the past – how much enlargement it can take, bearing in mind that, by broadening its appeal, ‘it dilutes the general ideological salience of class and, consequently, weakens the motivational force of class among workers’ (Harmel and Janda 1994, p. 272). This can be argued to have an effect on the party’s character, turning it from a mass party to a predominantly electorally oriented one. This argument, over-extended, entails the danger of making the party seem just like other parties.

The ambiguity over the party’s identity in the last two decades is clearly influencing its membership beyond its stated positions. The ESS’ (2009) most surprising finding refers to the total absence of any primacy in any type of activism by AKEL’s supporters. This is most evident in those types of activities that are advantageously associated with this party, as, for instance, participation in demonstrations. In addition, the diversification of labour relations towards the abolition of regulatory frameworks, a course of events favoured by the mainstream corpus of EU directives, leads to reduced numbers of people entering trade unions and political parties. A recent survey by the left-wing trade union, PEO (2009), disclosed that membership in trade unions is approximately 46 per cent of the salaried employees (compared to 53 per cent in a 2004 survey), with only 30 per cent actively involved in trade union affairs. The repercussions of this development are more sweeping for AKEL, which is historically associated with the trade union movement.

A plausible answer to the paradox of political activism related to AKEL may be the effects of governing on the parties of the left. Supposedly, when radical left parties take hold of executive power, their distinctiveness is undermined and eventually lost because citizens fail to differentiate between political parties of discernible ideologies. The consequences for parties of the left are more far-reaching because their political discourse was historically distinguished by the emphasis they attached to the need to change the political system. Subsequently, the party activists and followers who are not used to being in government find themselves in a soul-searching process (Olsen et al. 2010, p. 12). A series of irregularities and misgovernance during the Christofias administration (Phileleftheros, 25 July 2011)
has further raised questions about the distinctiveness of AKEL and has erased a significant part of Christofias’ popularity (Simerini poll, 24 July 2011).

Despite the changes that point to de-radicalisation, important elements of radical identity have been retained. AKEL remains in favour of an alternative social arrangement, progressive taxation, social provisions and allowances for the poorer strata of society (AKEL 2000, 2005, 2006, 2009a). This amalgam of positions points to the radical left category. Throughout its four-year tenure, the AKEL-led government has strengthened the welfare state by increasing the provisions for allowances and benefits by 42 per cent (Simerini 27 November 2011) and the minimum wage from 699 to 855 euros by introducing a scheme for increasing low-level pensions and by launching a comprehensive housing policy for people with low incomes. In addition, it has attempted twice – unsuccessfully – to impose taxation on profits and large land ownership.

Overall, the changes in the post-1990s era reflected what March (2008, p. 3) describes as a process of de-radicalisation of the far left after 1990, on the one hand, and AKEL’s increased ideological selectivity, on the other. AKEL became more pragmatic in pursuing short-term goals, while it consciously downgraded endless debates on the nature and timing of socialism. For some, the changes have edged the party towards classic social democracy (Dunphy and Bale 2007, p. 139). Others believe that the coexistence of a radical ideology with a reformist practice constitutes the key paradox in the historical course of the Cypriot left (Panayiotou 2006, p. 272). Incumbency further swelled the ranks of the critics. However, for AKEL, being in government does not mean being in power. Business, the media, state bureaucracy and other powerful institutions are beyond the left’s control.

For the party itself, however, the changes were an indispensable prerequisite in maintaining its influence in favour of the less privileged strata. Put simply, they were a temporary compromise that the party had to make (AKEL 2011). The party realises that the only feasible target in the era of the so-called ‘New Order’ is to preserve and, if possible, enhance the traditional social democratic welfare consensus, rather than agitating for a total transformation of society. Government participation represents the best way to weaken the power and influence of the right wing. The Cypriot left is successful because it has made the question of the unification of the island its central demand. This conjunction provides the framework for understanding AKEL’s bizarre character and its sui generis development and electoral returns.

Conclusion: Skating on Thin Ice

This case study, whilst modest in its claims, illuminates detail that is related to the wider picture of the communist and/or radical left. I have argued that the special pattern of change that AKEL initiated and the prioritisation of the Cyprus problem over any other cause have been successful thus far both in maintaining a distinct radical identity for the party and in increasing its vote share (while in government as well), while, at the same time, avoiding isolation. The effectiveness of the change was positively influenced by (a) systemic variables such as a strong left-right cleavage and the special circumstances of a small divided island and (b) by party-specific factors,
such as leadership skills and resilience, and organisational and ideological flexibility. The party has undergone significant internal ideological and strategic evolution without (yet) wiping out its radical identity. Being pragmatic in its everyday politics, AKEL has concentrated on practical campaigns, rather than on far-reaching ideological projects, thus avoiding significant internecine disputes over doctrinal questions. AKEL’s politics have persuaded the other political forces and various policy-makers that it does not present a threat to democracy, but should rather be viewed as a normal political actor.

Arguably, the threat to the party’s existence in the 1990s and the prospect of governing in the 2000s have united and mobilised the entire party structure. Nevertheless, maintaining AKEL’s long-term vision for socialism as well as its traditional anti-capitalist position on the one hand, while governing a capitalist EU member-state on the other, could prove a mission (almost) impossible. This balancing act may, at the same time, be a source of intra-party tension. The choice of managing capitalism has shifted the stake from the party’s social vision to the issue of maintaining power. Once in office, parties find that further compromises are forced by the constraints and demands of practical government and the need to take actions that may prove unpopular with their supporters (Katz 1990, p. 145). Further compromises may prove unavoidable, especially in the face of possible isolation. AKEL encounters the quandary of ideological faithfulness versus political effectiveness.

‘An evaluation of whether government participation has been successful or not should be based on whether the left has been able to achieve structural changes effective beyond the short term of government participation’ (Daiber and Kulke 2010, p. 7). The real question is whether any measures taken or any reforms implemented will not be reversed as soon as there is a shift in power. AKEL’s participation in government is largely exhausted in defensive strategies to prevent the worst. The question of transforming capitalism is not on the agenda, but the interests of the people certainly are.

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Note

1 Haravgi is the official newspaper of the Central Committee of AKEL.

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**Interviews**

1. Yiannakis Kolokasides, member of the Secretariat of the Political Bureau, AKEL, responsible for ideological affairs (8 July 2010).
2. Stephanos Stephanou, member of the Political Bureau of AKEL and government spokesman (9 July 2010).
3. Giorgos Loukaides, MP, member of the Central Committee of AKEL and head of the International Relations Office (29 January 2011).
4. Christos Alecou, member of the Secretariat of the Political Bureau, AKEL, responsible for organisational affairs (4 November 2011).