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**“Left-Wing” and “Right-Wing” Politics in post-1974 Cyprus:**

**A Story of Social Discord and Political Success**

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**Introduction**

The Greek Cypriot political system is a polarized one. Polarization in Cyprus has deep origins of historical and ethno-political nature. Not only the political system but – to a degree - the whole Greek Cypriot society functions as if it was cut in two pieces: The left one and the right one. Despite the fact that some attributes of this division have been weakening in the course of years, it is still valid. For example, in the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Cyprus the traditional male coffeehouses, mainly in the villages, were housed by associations with a clear-cut political discipline. The left-wing

associations were called “laika somatia”, which means “popular associations” and the right-wing ones were called “ethnikofrona somatia”, which means “associations loyal to the Greek national identity of the Greek Cypriots”. Even in our time, if a middle age or elderly man with traditional habits and way of life wants to visit a traditional Cypriot coffeehouse in his village or urban quarter, he would probably have to select between a “left” and a “right” one. Another example of this deep political division is football. At least to a degree most of the Cypriot football clubs remain politically and/or ideologically defined. Until recently their bonds with politics were very strong. In the last two decades these bonds have weakened. However, the football clubs’ fans still have solid political inclinations and the political parties attempt to exploit them, though usually in rather indirect ways.

In this paper we shall focus on the post-1974 political system of Cyprus, namely the Greek Cypriot political system which has developed in conditions of *de facto* division as a result of the Turkish invasion of 1974 and the occupation of northern Cyprus, where the Turkish Cypriots, along with settlers from Turkey, have created their own political system in the context of the internationally unrecognized “Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus”. We shall try to track its historical origins having in mind the aforementioned social division and explain the causes of its configuration by defining the reasons of the two poles’ success.

### **Two narratives and two milestones**

The left-wing party, AKEL (acronym for Rectifying Party of Working People) was founded in 1926. It is the oldest political party of Cyprus, constantly present and active in the island’s political life since its foundation. The rightists have been represented by subsequent parties, until Glafkos Clerides, a prominent persona of the

centre-right, founded DISY (acronym for Democratic Rally), in 1976. Left and right in Cyprus correspond to two distinct socio-political blocks with contradictory ideologies. The two parties' coexistence is relatively harmonious, especially since the middle '80ies. However, despite the democratic stability the island enjoys in the last 38 years, it seems that the national reconciliation is not still consolidated to the highest degree possible. The reasons are rather historical: The two blocks maintain different historical narratives regarding the post-1955 history of Cyprus. There are still open wounds which cause sharp disagreements between left-wing and right-wing citizens. The two parties usually abstain from referring to traumatic memories of the past. However, sometimes they cannot resist this political temptation especially in pre-election periods, in order to assure their followers' loyalty by reminding them of the "others' sinful past".

The aforementioned contrasting narratives have been constructed upon two historical milestones: EOKA struggle of 1955-1959 and the coup d' etat against President Makarios of July 1974.

### **The 1st milestone: EOKA struggle, 1955-1959**

The Greek Cypriots' armed uprising against the British colonial authorities<sup>1</sup> was essentially dominated by the right-wing. The uprising was organized by EOKA (acronym for National Organization of Cypriot Fighters). EOKA's twin leadership, Archbishop Makarios and Colonel Grivas were of right-wing views. Their main objective was self-determination and union with Greece ("enosis"). AKEL, despite the fact that it previously supported enosis, abstained and actually opposed EOKA on the grounds of Grivas' anti-communist convictions and potential loss of their

prominent political role. According to a CIA report of April 14, 1955, the colonial government had received support “only from the Communists and the Turkish minority. The Greek majority on Cyprus appears to be solidly behind the Nationalist agitation. (...) The Communists apparently believe violence might jeopardize their favored position in the colony. They enjoy greater political freedom on Cyprus than the Nationalists, and have good relations with the British authorities on labor matters.”<sup>2</sup>

Some right-wing loyalists have never forgotten AKEL’s opposition to EOKA and its struggle. They certainly insist that some AKEL followers disclosed EOKA fighters to the colonial authorities, speaking thus of treason. On the other hand, AKEL and its supporters decline the treason story and they fire back by accusing EOKA for murders of Greek Cypriot Communists.

EOKA struggle ended in 1959 when the United Kingdom, Greece, Turkey, the Greek Cypriots and the Turkish Cypriots agreed for the independence of Cyprus and the establishment of the Republic of Cyprus, a unitary state composed by two officially recognized communities: The Greek Cypriot (vast majority of more than 80% of the overall population) and the Turkish Cypriot. Greece, Turkey and the United Kingdom were ascribed a guarantor status. Makarios became the first President of the Republic of Cyprus and Dr. Fazil Kuchuck the first (and only ever since) Vice-President.

Despite failure to achieve enosis and AKEL’s accusations, EOKA was imprinted on the official Greek Cypriot interpretation of the modern history of Cyprus as a virtuous organization which fought for the freedom of the island. The historical narrative that

prevailed was much closer to the right-wing version of history. In other words, if indeed “history is written by the victor”, the right-wing was the ideological bloc which won that historical battle.

### **The 2<sup>nd</sup> milestone: EOKA B’ and the coup d’ etat of July 15, 1974**

The first decade of the Republic’s life was far from tranquil: In 1964 Turkish Cypriots departed from the administration of the Republic after inter-communal agitations caused by disagreements on a proposal of constitutional changes made by President Makarios and withdrew into armed enclaves. Three years later Greece fell under the rule of the military junta’s autocrats. While these developments were taking place the Greek Cypriot community was not united under the goal of strengthening the Republic since a significant portion of the people and the politicians continued speaking of enosis. Things became even worse when a nationalist fraction of the right-wing bloc (enhanced by pro-junta Greek military officers serving in Cyprus) began plotting to overthrow (even physically eliminate) President Makarios. In 1972 Grivas founded EOKA B’, a far-right paramilitary organization which was accused of terrorist attacks and murders of political opponents. The Greek Cypriots were deeply divided and the Republic was convulsed by severe clashes. Grivas died in January 1974, however EOKA B’ continued its illegal activity. In July 15 1974 the Greek junta organized and executed a coup d’ etat against President Makarios. The putschists appointed an arbitrary government led by members of EOKA B’ and spuriously announced that President Makarios was dead. Turkey took advantage of the disorder in Cyprus and, after evoking its guarantor status, invaded the island on July 20 and put a part of it under occupation claiming that it attempted to protect the

Turkish Cypriots and reestablish order. Ever since though the *status quo* remains intact and Turkey still occupies 37% of the land of Cyprus.<sup>3</sup>

The Turkish invasion and occupation caused thousands of dead and missing persons, while approximately 200,000 Greek Cypriots evacuated their homes in occupied Cyprus and became refugees. According to the official Greek Cypriot interpretation, junta and EOKA B' provided a veil of legitimacy for the invasion. In 1972, in a prophetic speech before thousands of people in Nicosia, President Makarios stressed that: "The enemies of Cyprus are satisfied because they find an unexpected ally, the EOKA B'. What are their intentions by these horrible crimes, by the loathsome perpetrators and their supporters? Probably they want partition."<sup>4</sup>

AKEL, which backed President Makarios in these difficult times, never stopped accusing the "fascists" of EOKA B' and its followers for the tragedy of Cyprus. The words "treason" and "traitors" returned in the Greek Cypriot political rhetoric, though this time they were used by the left-wing bloc. Two years after the coup and the invasion DISY was founded and many EOKA B' supporters, who found themselves politically homeless after the disaster of 1974, joined the new party. Fingering DISY and its members' "sinful past" would remain AKEL's main political weapon in the years to come. This time, it was AKEL and the left-wing bloc to be the "victor who wrote history."

### **AKEL and DISY: Different but equally successful stories**

AKEL and DISY were established as dominant powers in Greek Cypriot politics in the early 1980ies. In the years of political stability which followed 1974 they have been rotating as ruling parties and as parliamentary majorities, therefore they have been dealing with the Republic's main political issues. The most important though is

that they have shaped respective cores of support which have been solid and big enough to assure their political domination. In the following paragraphs we shall evaluate the reasons of their success.

## **AKEL**

As we have already argued, AKEL managed to be the main “author” of the post-1974 official Greek Cypriot historical narrative. Makarios was dominating the political system of Cyprus until his death in August 1977. He wasn’t just a leader: He was a symbol of democracy and struggle for freedom and his popularity was unprecedented. Despite his popularity though, he didn’t channel this wide support into a political party. Two parties, socialist United Democratic Center Union (EDEK) and center-right Democratic Party (DIKO) tried to attract Makarios’ supporters. However, it was AKEL which was organized and networked enough to take advantage of this socio-political stream, after the passing of its leader. Thenceforth, AKEL focused its political rhetoric on the treason of Cyprus by the Greek junta and EOKA B’, as well as the party’s resistance to the punchists. This successful choice AKEL made though couldn’t leave the party’s ideology unaffected: The Communist party would have to modify its ideology and – therefore - water down its Marxist rhetoric in order to attract non-communist supporters of Makarios. This happened eventually and it was the price of AKEL’s transformation from a revolutionary movement to a mildly left-wing party. This transformation would be inevitable, sooner or later, as a result of the political attributes of Cyprus. According to T. W. Adams: “The communists in Cyprus cannot afford to deny the existence of immutable traditions nor are they able to avoid the hard realities of change which characterize the environment in which they must perform. AKEL should have conceded long ago that it must act on the political rather than the revolutionary level.”<sup>5</sup> On that crucial verge of history AKEL would

have to choose between dedication to its ideology and political power within the system it once envisaged to transform. It profoundly preferred the second choice. As a result of this historical choice, AKEL's gain was double:

First, it achieved the creation of a solid, interclass electoral base. This would not be feasible without AKEL's extraordinary, soviet-style mobilization mechanism, which not only survived the ideological modification but it also gained legitimacy and access to more potential members and voters. This mechanism provided access and power to multiple sections of the Greek Cypriot society (trade unions, youth, sports, even the business owners). AKEL is not just a party. It is a wide system of redistribution of wealth and political power. Being a member of this system becomes not only an honor, but also a necessity for AKEL's followers. For them the party is above personal ambitions. They know that fighting for the party is like fighting for themselves. This necessity, along with the very effective domestic structures of intelligence and data collection, is the X-factor of this mechanism's success.<sup>6</sup>

Second, and most important, the ideological modification obliterated any chances of creation of a unitary centrist party, which would challenge AKEL's hegemony in center-left. 1972-1974 period and the resistance to the putchists created room for common beliefs and policies among AKEL, DIKO and EDEK. This proved to be fatal for the two centrist parties' electoral power: Common beliefs allowed AKEL to gain influence among their supporters. Therefore, pulling away from a coalition with AKEL and, instead, cooperating with DISY, could cause them a disastrous massive capture of voters by AKEL. This happened for example when DIKO and EDEK backed the candidacy of DISY's leader Glafkos Clerides in the presidential elections of 1993 and 1998 respectively. As a result of centrist support (DIKO in 1993 and EDEK in 1998) Clerides won both elections. However, both centrist parties suffered



respective electoral losses in the parliamentary elections of 1996 and 2001. During the same period, AKEL's electoral power was steadily increasing: 31% in 1991, 33% in 1996 and 35% in 2001.

## **DISY**

DISY's success was also defined by good timing. In 1976, two years after the Turkish invasion and one year before the death of Makarios, a new political formation was to be founded: People who loathed Makarios for one reason or another, members of nationalist paramilitary groups which functioned during the inter-communal agitations, even members of EOKA B' who gained asylum in the context of national reconciliation, were politically homeless. The most important though was the vast majority of the center-right bloc, mainly composed by the masses of EOKA romantics. People of humble origins, who were raised with stories of heroism and self-sacrifice and proud of their Greek national identity which was undermined due to Greek junta's coup d' etat and due to Greece's failure to protect Cyprus during the Turkish invasion. A charismatic leader, Glafkos Clerides, foresaw the window of opportunity and founded DISY in order to capitalize on the respect he enjoyed among his center-right fellows. Clerides was ideologically different to the vast majority of DISY's founding members and supporters. He envisaged a modern liberal party, based on Western-European patterns. However, he managed to find a reason for everybody ranging from center-right to far right to become a member or a voter of DISY. And these people, who were despised and fingered as "traitors" because they were rightists - therefore potential supporters of EOKA B' - felt gratitude for Clerides who built a political home for them. This gratitude would conciliate any political

divergences between the leader and the supporters, or among the supporters, and create reciprocity and a feeling of a common purpose: To become a ruling majority and “save Cyprus from the communists”. As communists they defined (and they actually still do) not the supporters of communist socio-economic structures, but the “anti-Greeks”, the haters of motherland Greece, those who betrayed EOKA fighters and those who rejected the statement that “Cyprus is Greek”. Clerides never shared these simplistic convictions. However, he compromised with them in order to create a solid electoral base. Today DISY remains a strong pole of power. Despite its political isolation after the deep division the Greek Cypriot society suffered from in the post-1974 period, it managed to win presidential elections twice in the 1990ies. Moreover, it managed to retain its political impact even after the vast majority of its supporters defied the party’s call for a “yes” vote in the referendum of 2004 for the ratification for the Annan plan as a framework of the settlement of the Cyprus problem.<sup>7</sup>

The most important factor of the party’s success has been robust leadership. First, it was Glafkos Clerides, founder and first president of the party and President of the Republic of Cyprus between 1993 and 2003. Now it’s Nikos Anastasiades.

Anastasiades, walking after Clerides’ steps, managed to mitigate internal clashes, especially in 2004, despite the fact that he was part of them. Contrary to Clerides, he was intensively questioned due to his unpopular support of the Annan plan, which was rejected by 75,6% of the Greek Cypriot voters. He managed though to survive in the political arena, gain control of the whole party and become the party’s candidate for the presidential elections of February 2013, with very good chances of election.

## **Conclusions**

As we have seen, the post-1974 political history of Cyprus is marked by social discord. Left-wing and right-wing politics in Cyprus mirror a deep social division. AKEL and DISY pursue contrasting ideologies and socioeconomic agendas. In Western European terms, AKEL is a mild communist party which has compromised with the terms of liberal democracy, while DISY is a center-right party which combines features of liberalism, conservatism and moderate nationalism.<sup>8</sup> However, the discord in the Greek Cypriot society is not defined by terms of class, but rather by different ethno-political perceptions which are delimited by clashing interpretations of the modern history of Cyprus. All these years the Cyprus problem has been the hotspot of the political tag of war. Despite the fact that DISY and AKEL have rather similar views regarding the preferential terms of the settlement of the Cyprus problem, contrasting ethno-political perceptions of their supporters (and mutual interests of their leaderships in maintaining bipolarism) allowed the polarized system to survive. The fact that the two parties have been capitalizing on the ethno-political polarization leads us to the conclusion that social discord has been the real cause of their success.

Recently, in the last couple of years, amidst the worst financial crisis the Republic of Cyprus has suffered since 1974, the Cyprus problem and ethno-political clashes are not the most important issues in Greek Cypriot political agenda. The crisis in the banking sector, high fiscal deficit and unprecedentedly high unemployment have set a new field of political discord over who is responsible for this unpleasant situation and which should be the Republic's priorities in pursuit of recovery. The fact that a left-wing government, led by the former Secretary General of AKEL, President Dimitris Christofias, has "lost the ball" in the field of economy, has undermined the party's credibility among its supporters, while DISY exploits its opponent's failure. At the

same time, political conditions in view of the upcoming presidential elections of February 2013 seem to favor the development of a “third way” due to a mass of disappointed AKEL and DIKO supporters. In any case though, DISY and AKEL will definitely try to build their political future on the solid foundations created during the years of ethno-political clash. “Traitors”, “communists” and “fascists” are not in vogue, but they are still valid as political weapons.

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<sup>1</sup> E.g., Robert Holland, *Britain and the Revolt in Cyprus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

<sup>2</sup> Central Intelligence Agency, “Current Intelligence Review”, 14 Apr. 1955.

<sup>3</sup> William Mallinson, *Cyprus: A Modern History* (London: I. B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2005), Heinz A. Richter, *A Concise History of Modern Cyprus 1878-2009* (Mainz: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VZWL1zitF1U> (December 5, 2012)

<sup>5</sup> T. W. Adams, AKEL: *The Communist Party of Cyprus* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1971), 199.

<sup>6</sup> Michalis Kontos “AKEL System: The Secrets of Establishment and Successful Reproduction” *Synchroni Apopsi Magazine*, Issue14 (June 2009), accessible in

<http://magazine.apopsi.com.cy/2009/06/%CF%8D-%CE%AC-%CE%AD/> (December 3, 2012) –in Greek

<sup>7</sup> Claire Palley, *An International Relations Debacle: The UN Secretary-General’s Mission of Good Offices in Cyprus 1999-2004* (Portland, Oregon: Hart Publishind, 2005).

<sup>8</sup> A sober analysis of these concepts is provided by Yves Mèny, Andrew Knapp, *Government and Politics in Western Europe: Britain, France, Italy, Germany*. Third Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), chapter 2.