

# The Rise of Far-Right Populism in Cyprus: The Case of ELAM

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## Abstract

Over the last decades, the appeal, success and political power of far-right populist parties has been multiplying at alarming rates in disperse yet parallel waves across Europe and beyond. Their ability to shape modern democratic governance by shaking liberal values and mainstream politics on both national and transnational levels, makes studying the causes of their rise exceedingly relevant and necessary. This article investigates the factors and conditions that paved the way for the far-right populist party of the Republic of Cyprus, the National People's Front (ELAM), to be elected in the national parliament in 2016. Through a political economy framework, the paper teases out the core shortcomings of liberal democratic governance from 2008 onwards to illustrate how the crude effects of the financial crisis provoked a multifaceted crisis, delegitimizing existing political actors and structures, and enabling the substantiation of ELAM's far-right populist rhetoric and approach.

**Keywords:** ELAM; far-right populism; Republic of Cyprus; failures of liberal democratic governance; political apathy; political economy framework.

## Introduction

For the first time in the history of the Republic of Cyprus (RoC hereafter), a far-right populist party was voted into the Parliament in May 2016. The National People's Front, known as ELAM, abruptly penetrated the volatile walls of the Greek-Cypriot political structure and gained unprecedented electoral power, which has not yet ceased to grow. What makes the case of ELAM particularly interesting is first, the fact that it is born out of a conflict-ridden society whose collective memory is tainted by the scars of an ethnic divide that still dominates socio-political discussions<sup>1</sup> (Katsourides 2013b). The Cyprus question (or problem), consequence of a failed coup instigated by the Greek junta

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<sup>1</sup> Various historical accounts have been written about the Cypriot conflict, with the narrative promoted by each side (left/right or Greek-Cypriot/Turkish-Cypriot) constructed to serve and reaffirm their own political goals; raising questions about their accuracy (Papadakis, Peristianis & Welz 2006). Therefore, all references used here are based on verifiable facts without focusing on the actors' motives.

and the subsequent invasion by Turkey in 1974, led to decades of ethnic-driven violence and the separation of Cyprus' two largest ethnic communities<sup>2</sup>. Given the ongoing stalemate, coupled with failed reconciliation attempts for a bi-communal bi-zonal federation, the threat of war has never truly disappeared from the Greek-Cypriot collective imagination; thus laying the foundations for the paradoxical rise of a far-right populist party.

Second, in the 2016 Parliamentary elections, ELAM challenged the long-standing dominance of mainstream parties, while its anti-establishment and racist rhetoric remained unchanged throughout the party's existence. This raises the question of whether its discourse can solely account for its sudden appeal to a population that previously disregarded or rejected it, or if other factors consolidated this phenomenon. If we look closer into the wide variety of people who voted for ELAM (see data.gov.cy 2017), it is clear that people with dissimilar political orientations and previous political affiliations had contradicting motivations when voting. For example, in the case of Vox in Spain, Zanotti and Rama (2020) note that the party's supporters are not necessarily xenophobic, anti-EU, anti-environment or homophobic. On the contrary, they are merely responding to political figures who express legitimate concerns about the lack of representation extended to society as a whole, in an unusually drastic and rather crude way.

So what were then the factors that facilitated the rise of ELAM in 2016? What made it possible for ELAM's electoral base to more than double within five years? There were no substantial changes, or even prospects that the geopolitical situation would undertake significant permanent transformations, and the party's agenda and rhetoric cannot solely explain its election. So, what led Greek-Cypriots to diverge from supporting mainstream parties to embracing radical approaches at that specific moment? As election results do not occur in a vacuum, but are "*the end product of a series of events and developments that precede the actual process of voting*" (Katsourides 2014b), it is important to question the causes which enabled this growth and success.

### **The case-study of ELAM**

ELAM was formed in 2008 but was only legally recognized as a political party in 2011 when it made its official political debut by taking part in the Parliamentary elections, gaining a mere 1% (Katsourides 2013c). Since then, ELAM's popularity and the appeal of its rhetoric have been progressively

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<sup>2</sup> The Cypriot society traditionally comprises different peoples, languages and cultures, out of which the Greek language persisted and determined the modern identity of the majority of its residents, alongside a sizable community of Turkish-Cypriots since the Ottoman rule (1571-1878) (Michael 2010 in Aktar, Kizilyurek & Ozkirimli 2010). The construction of each community's nationalism developed out of their respective 'motherlands', resulting in a still prevalent "*uncompromising clash of nationalisms*" (Aktar, Kizilyurek & Ozkirimli 2010).

becoming substantiated, decoded by an upwards trajectory of electoral successes: almost 1% at the 2013 Presidential elections; 2.7% at the 2014 European elections; 3.7% at the 2016 Parliamentary elections; 5.7% at the 2018 Presidential elections; 8.2% at the 2019 European elections; and 6% at the 2023 Presidential elections (Politico n.d.).

The party existed before 2008 as a vigilante group under the name ‘Golden Dawn Cyprus Branch’ (Charalambous & Christoforou 2018; Katsourides 2013c). It is led by Christos Christou, a former active member of the Greek far-right neo-Nazi party Golden Dawn (GD), which was recognized as a criminal and radical organisation by a Greek court in 2020, effectively banning it from the Greek party structure (Malteizou & Papadimas 2020; Wodak 2015). This affiliation directly connects ELAM and GD, albeit the lack of evidence of financial linkages (see Kividiotis 2019). In fact, ELAM’s agenda is dictated by GD’s ideological principles in an univocal manner but accustomed to the Cypriot context. Both parties are “*inspired by a nationalist vision premised on the struggles of an imagined ethnic community*”, centred around the embodiment of a pure Greek ‘race’, of which the Greek-Cypriot population is an integral part (Aktar, Kizilyurek & Ozkirimli 2010; Charalambous & Christoforou 2018). The anciency and depth of this relationship is denoted in ELAM’s depiction of the Greek identity of Greek-Cypriots as ever-existing and the most pridetworthy element of Cyprus’ history. Yet, this assimilation is manifested in a radical way, which stimulates racist and xenophobic behaviour directed towards anyone who is not considered Greek. In addition, ELAM’s emphasis on the prominence of traditional ideals through its main slogan ‘fatherland, religion, and family’ as well as the proud representation of its affinities with EOKA B<sup>3</sup>, indicate an outdated patriotic norm typical of far-right populist parties.

ELAM’s affiliation to GD and certain acts of violence of its members can lead one to identify ELAM as a neo-Nazi party (Council of Europe 2016). However, the lack of a universal method of categorisation of right-wing extremist parties hinders any attempt to place one party under a specific ideological umbrella (Mudde 2007). Therefore, this paper classifies ELAM on the basis of Mudde’s (2000; 2007) taxonomic methodology: according to the party’s official literature covering both external and internal sources. Based on the study of Charalambous and Christoforou (2018) which investigates the correlation between far-right parties and populism through a content analysis and

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<sup>3</sup> EOKA B (1971-1978) sought Cyprus’ reunification with Greece through terrorist tactics and is associated with the Greek military coup (Ioannou 2019).

categorisation of ELAM and GD's press releases from 2010 to 2015, this paper classifies ELAM as a far-right populist party.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Among existing literature, there are several justifications for the rise of far-right populist politics and movements at given periods. Cultural grievances, specifically the fear of destruction of national identity, are often considered as a prevailing explanation for this phenomenon as they go beyond economic disparities and are instead driven by broader ethnic transformations. However, what this approach fails to consider is that although it pinpoints a number of problems as contributors of populism, it does not problematise the causes for its rise, neglecting the reasons that enabled the climate in which these fears blossomed and consequently allowing far-right populist parties to capitalize on them. On the other hand, the mutually reinforcing relationship between the dynamics and forces of neoliberalism and the expansion of far-right populism across Europe demonstrate how interrelated politico-economic grievances allowed for the manifestation of far-right parties. As capitalism fosters a non-democratic way of governance by systematically de-politicising fundamentally political issues, such as production, property, or labour, public disengagement with political processes, as well as the weakening of state sovereignty, become inherent elements of neoliberal governance (Cerny 1999; Duzgun 2020; Stein 2016; Kiely 2016; Wolfgang 2016). This will be reproduced as long as the capitalist system thrives through neoliberal policies, thus sustaining far-right populism as a perennial phenomenon that will continue coexisting alongside democracy so long as liberal democratic governance produces the same grievances (Eatwell and Goodwin 2018). By employing a critical political economy framework, this paper builds on Katsourides' (2013c) analysis to examine the extent to which the loss of sovereignty of national and regional actors, as well as that of the liberal democratic system as a whole, provoked an era of political apathy which contributed to the gradual yet robust growth of ELAM.

### **Methods**

To identify these factors, this paper employs a qualitative process tracing empirical framework on a single case-study. It enables the tracing of the causal chain and mechanisms that led to the rise of a far-right populist party in a specific context and moment in time. This method is twofold: the deductive and the inductive. The former assesses whether certain effects of a hypothesized causal chain are observed in a specific case. The latter applies evidence of one case to develop a theory explaining it and providing supplementary implications that could be tested in other cases. This paper incorporates both, as it evaluates the causes on a broader scale, while also identifying elements specific to the

Cypriot context. Thus, this study could be used for comparative analysis by providing analogous empirical material or simply prove that this particular case serves as an anomaly (O'Brien & Williams 2016). To identify the causal chain, the process tracing technique tests the correlation between independent variables and the dependent variable's outcome (Bennet & Checkel 2015). Considering that the increase of ELAM's electoral base is the dependent variable, an assessment of the factors that occurred between the outbreak of financial crisis in 2008 and ELAM's election in 2016 that might have facilitated this rise is essential. To achieve this, an argumentation is built on an extensive literature, incorporating both primary and secondary sources, including independent and EU-commissioned surveys, public opinion polls and statistics; EU and government publications; newspaper articles; party documents, videos, and interviews; academic articles, journals, and books.

### **Limitations**

Assessing the possible factors that facilitated the rise of ELAM in Cyprus is challenging. First, there is no guarantee that the data on voting rationale are completely accurate due to possible preference falsifications. That is, when people express different views in public than their true preferences because of the expectation that the former provides greater benefits or better serves their reputation (Frank 1996). As a small community, the individual and collective (family) reputation of Greek-Cypriots holds a vital space in each person's perception. Paired with the traditionally close ties and affiliations that entire families have with political parties, the likelihood for preference falsifications is quite high (Katsourides, 2014b). Second, as Cohn (2012) notes, each person's theoretical views determine not only the theory with which an issue is explicitly examined, but also defines the facts used throughout the analysis, and the significance allocated to them. Thus, the interpretation of facts is undoubtedly subjective, causing their examination to be subject to investigation and selection bias (Thies 2002).

### **A multifaceted crisis in the making**

In 2008, Demetris Christofias, of the left-wing party AKEL<sup>4</sup>, was elected President when the economy was solid with 3.3% government surplus while the political landscape was mainly preoccupied with the Cyprus question following the rejection of the 2004 Annan Plan referendum for reunification (Katsourides 2014b; Orphanides 2014). However, the decision of the administration (in a coalition with the Democratic Party (DIKO) and Movement for Social Democrats (EDEK)) to increase social spending by 42% led to massive deficits of government expenditure. Coupled with the dependency of the economy on foreign markets – spiralling since the outbreak of the 2008 crisis, the Republic saw a

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<sup>4</sup> This was the first time AKEL became the governing party.

negative fiscal growth by 2009 and subsequently went into recession (idem). In the meantime, the exposure of Greek-Cypriot banks to Greek debt caused Cyprus to lose its access to international credit markets by May 2011, further weakening an already overwhelmed banking system and generating widespread economic uncertainty (Fiedler 2019). The adoption of Troika's measures on Greek sovereign debt further intensified this phenomenon, resulting to the devastation of the RoC's two main banks – Bank of Cyprus and Marfin-Laiki Bank – and a loss equivalent to one fourth of the Republic's GDP (Triga 2017).

This led domestic (e.g. Central Bank; opposition; press), and EU actors (e.g. European Council; Troika) to pressure the government to conform to EU fiscal standards and obligations by seeking external assistance. The Christofias administration avoided doing so as much as possible, aiming to avoid the application of austerity measures by exiting the Eurozone<sup>5</sup> (Katsourides 2014b). The delay caused the economy to further deteriorate, with unemployment rates reaching almost 15% and disproportionately affecting the youth, while *“the banks' balance sheets deteriorated even further, non-performing loans increased (...), [t]he budget deficit (...) was adding roughly €1 billion per year to the cost, further increasing the eventual amount of the bailout”* (Michaelides 2016 in Michaelides & Orphanides 2016). The administration faced direct consequences as a result of this move, with public opinion blaming it for the ECB's decision to not support the Cypriot bond market, which later provoked the necessity for a bailout agreement (Katsourides 2014b). How the situation unfolded implies that in the context of an integrated market system, it is increasingly challenging for nations to withstand EU pressures alone and act beyond EU-set boundaries; a perceived 'weakness' that directly harms the sovereignty of national institutions.

This was not the first time the leftist government succumbed to EU-predetermined policies that it would have vetoed if allowed to take autonomous decisions. The Christofias administration conceded to freezing wage increases for a two-year period and imposing a 2% higher VAT rate, both of which it had previously opposed on the basis of its ideological standing (Katsourides 2012); a clear example of how going against the confines of EU regulation can not only negatively affect the economy but can also have severe political ramifications. Namely, the legitimacy of the incumbent is widely weakened, as they cannot take charge of regulating the economy or adopting measures on a national scale to improve public welfare. As a result, the delegitimization reflects negatively on the liberal democratic system itself as it sets limits that cannot be easily surpassed and do not serve the people's wellbeing. In this light, a crisis of the political system seemed inevitable in the Greek-Cypriot political landscape.

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<sup>5</sup> Although this was never realized, AKEL's strategy triggered an anti-memorandum discussion which was later used by ELAM to capitalize on the implications of the memorandum.

Here, it is important to mention that an explosion at the Mari Naval Base in July 2011 led to increased economic costs on the government following the destruction of the island's main power station causing long-term power outages (Ioannides 2013). Both the government and AKEL faced enormous backlash for its economic consequences and overlooking preventative measures, with the President accused of “negligence and carelessness” and faced with demands to resign (Theodoulou 2011). Meanwhile, AKEL was faced with frequent attacks and hostilities in the Parliament whilst both EDEK and DIKO dismantled the governing coalition in 2010 and 2011 respectively (Katsourides 2012), leading to an even greater drop in public trust towards the government.

This represents one of the most catalytic moments that shaped the direction of Greek-Cypriot political landscape in that, in the public's eye, this incident overshadowed the underlying effects of a multifaceted crisis boiling underneath the surface. The effects of ongoing economic volatility combined with growing public distrust of the political system on both national and EU levels did not pull any weight neither within public discussions nor in the press. Instead, there was soaring disapproval of the President himself as well as his party and a certain degree of reduced voter turnout. Katsourides (2012) suggests that AKEL forms part of a broader pattern of radical left parties enduring the far-reaching effects of liberal democratic governance once in power “*because their political discourse was historically distinguished by the emphasis they attached to the need to change the political system*”. On the contrary, the economic voting theory argues that “*voters act rationally to punish or reward the incumbents depending on their perception of the progress of their national economy*” (Lewis-Beck & Paldam 2000; Triga 2017). On these grounds, Hernández and Kriesi (2016) demonstrate that the European countries most affected by the Great Recession, especially those who faced dramatic events such as the Mari explosion and/or a Troika intervention, were more prone to incumbent punishment. However, what both these arguments do not consider – and the public failed to acknowledge – is that perhaps for the first time in the country's history, there was public outcry against the political system as a whole (Katsourides 2014b). The decisions of the Christofias administration revealed that the structure of today's capitalist-driven global governance is so rigidly established in the RoC, particularly as an EU member, that it goes beyond any ruling party's ideological positions. Christofias was faced with significant constraints to his ability to regulate the economy, namely, the lack of international influence typical of small countries, its dependency on the EU, the capitalist state system and the globalization process; all of which rendered it impossible to achieve any long-term or systemic changes. Put simply, the underlying constraints of integrated market economies triggered a process of delegitimization of national and European institutions. In turn, this process produced the necessary conditions that pushed voters to either be less engaged in politics or seek

effective, immediate solutions, and strong leadership elsewhere. By the end of Christofias' term, the deteriorating state of the economy directly affected state and EU sovereignty, having serious repercussions on the entire liberal democratic system; a process deepened by the adoption of the Troika rescue package.

### **Prolonging the crisis: The implications of the Troika bail-in**

The economic uncertainty looming over the Greek-Cypriot society triggered a trend already prevailing in other Southern European countries: political instability and illegitimacy. The transfer of power from left-wing AKEL to right-wing DISY with the election of Nicos Anastasiades in 2013 was not enough to reverse or even halt the development of a political crisis. Public outburst against the adoption of a financial assistance program led the Parliament to reject the first deal offered by Troika (Katsourides 2014b). Yet, failed attempts to acquire assistance elsewhere, forced the government to accept a new Troika deal on 25 March 2013, which resulted in additional costs onto the population. The deal included loaning 10 billion euros, Marfin-Laiki Bank shutting down, while *“levying all uninsured deposits of 100,000€ there, and levying up to 60% of uninsured deposits in the Bank of Cyprus above 100,000€”* (idem). The nature of the second deal essentially transformed the agreement from a bail-out to a bail-in plan, generating wealth losses on both individual and collective levels (Triga and Papa 2015). This is noteworthy considering that only a minority of the Greek-Cypriot society is highly economically disadvantaged compared to other developed countries – non-manual salaried labour represented more than 70% of the earning population, which comprised of *“white-collar, working in public and semi-public fields, in the banking sector and in small-to-medium-sized service enterprises”* (Katsourides 2012). The deposit cuts therefore directly hit a considerable portion of the population on an individual level, while on a collective level, lower disposable incomes meant that aggregate consumption and subsequently output had negative multiplier impacts on the economy (Hardouvelis 2016). Specifically, the Republic's capacity for economic prosperity was dramatically reduced, GDP dropped by almost 6% by mid-2013, while unemployment reached approximately 17%. The financial sector suffered long-term damages due to withdrawals of foreign investments (roughly 18%) shortly prior to the agreement, and limited investment activities from 2013 to 2016 (Fiedler 2019). Although the imposition of further strict austerity measures facilitated the relatively swift recovery of the economy, their implementation was counterproductive for the population itself, as living standards deteriorated while social inequalities increased (Ioannou & Charalambous 2017).

The public reaction was twofold. On the one hand, the inability of the government to reject the implementation of the agreement and of additional austerity measures caused further economic uncertainty and dissatisfaction with the government. Polls conducted immediately after the agreement



show that more than 60% of respondents did not trust President Anastasiades (Katsourides 2014b). Triga and Papa (2015) illustrate that public anger and accountability was directed towards the banks, previous and current governments as well as corrupt elites, because of the rejection of the first aid package by the same actors who later became its biggest supporters. Part of this blame was directed towards the incumbent himself, who was often referred to as a ‘traitor’ whose decisions served foreign institutions and powers instead of its own population. On the other hand, the fact that this was the first bail-in deal<sup>6</sup> pursued by the EU was perceived as a betrayal from an institution whose role was hitherto seen as protective<sup>7</sup> (Katsourides 2014b). This impression refers to the idea that EU membership would bring economic prosperity on both national and personal levels, solutions to socio-political problems, and security against Turkey (Katsourides 2016b). By contrast, after 2013, the EU’s reluctance to fairly address the implications of the Great Recession and existing socioeconomic inequalities was met with public anger and exasperation (Katsourides 2014b). The way in which the second Troika deal unfolded was seen as “*the dangerous outcomes of capitalism*” and of European integration (Katsourides 2016a). Its harshness was received as an illegitimate and unfair defilement of the Greek-Cypriot community, insinuating that it was purposefully executed to weaken Cyprus’ economic position and political power to exploit its natural resources (e.g. gas) (Triga and Papa 2015). Accordingly, Greek-Cypriots considered themselves as victims unable to react to the will of major powers, thereby becoming more susceptible to endorse populist parties.

Yet, if one thing became clear from the agreement is the extent to which the EU’s overwhelming powers and integration regulate the state’s governing tools and subsequently limit its sovereignty on both national and international fronts (Katsourides 2016a). Even as DISY attempted to portray its close affiliation with the EU as a stabilizing and navigating factor for the economic hardships that would follow, there was minimal public trust towards political institutions (Katsourides 2014b). This led part of the Greek-Cypriot society to view the EU, particularly Germany, as the perpetrators of politico-economic turbulence and call for an exit from the Eurozone as a form of resistance to EU constraints imposed on local governance; rhetoric often used by ELAM members as well (Triga & Papa 2015). By spring 2015, almost half of the population had a negative image of the EU and defined the economic situation – specifically high unemployment – as the most important EU-related problem that the country was facing (Eurobarometer 2015). As the 2013 financial crisis transformed perceptions of the EU from a politically oriented ‘soft’ Euroscepticism, to a deeper, more economically rooted one, the

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<sup>6</sup> Later incorporated into the international regulatory framework for banks, the Basel III Agreement.

<sup>7</sup> Public sentiments towards the EU are stirred by the media and reinforced by the discourse of political parties who have close ties to both (Katsourides 2016b).

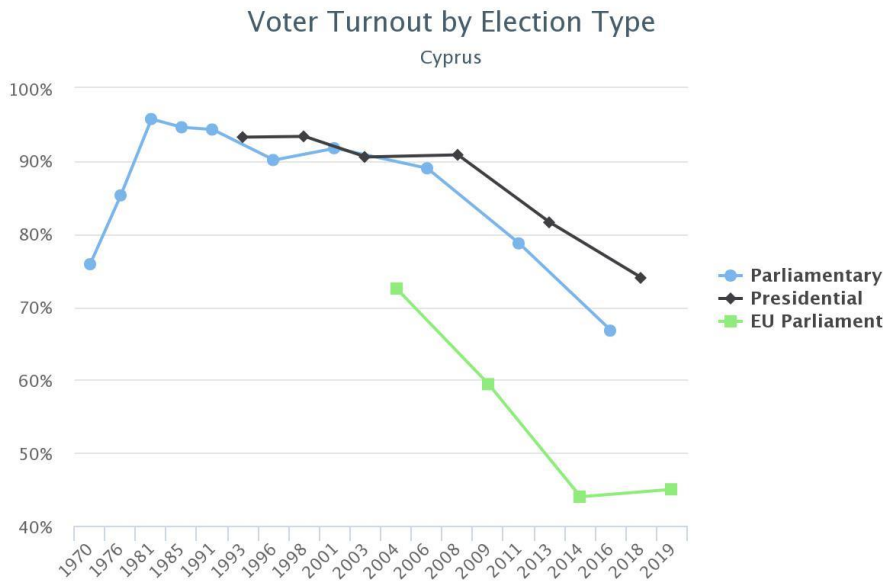
following period saw an enhancement of an already-existing, multi-layered legitimacy crisis (Katsourides 2016b). Such shocks and shifts produced mounting levels of mistrust, contributing to the rise of a far-right populist party expressing its distrust of the political establishment and exposing corrupt politicians (Triga, Mendez & Djouvas 2019). The underlining emphasis of populism on democratic illiberalism was therein substantiated not only through the consequences of the economic crisis, but also through discrediting previous governments. Yet, to draw this connection, it is crucial to first analyse the impacts of reduced political participation as a direct consequence of the political system losing its legitimacy, parallel to the escalation of economic turmoil.

### **Political apathy and a fragmented party system**

The global rise of public disillusionment towards political participation became apparent in the RoC through a substantial decline in voter turnout, with abstention rates peaking during the 2014 European elections. Figure 1 shows an abrupt decrease of voter turnout from 2008 onwards, denoting signs of political apathy towards the ineffective functioning of liberal democracy. This drop reflects a parallel decline of public trust in the political system, particularly in the EU: turnout in European elections was never as high as in national elections, but after the bail-in agreement, this plummeted by an unprecedented 20%. Indeed, almost half of absentee voters noted that they did not feel that the RoC benefited from its EU accession (Katsourides 2015), while in 2013, 57% of young registered voters stated that they would refrain from voting in EU elections because of their disapproval of the EU (Eurobarometer 2013). In fact, 77% of Greek-Cypriot youth did not attribute any importance to EU elections, having the lowest score among EU countries<sup>8</sup>. The example of the 2016 Parliamentary elections is noteworthy because even though voter turnout was recorded at 67%, this percentage was relatively low for Greek-Cypriot standards as seen in figure 1, particularly if compared to the astounding 96% in 1981. This shows that voting constituted a prominent form of political participation, hence, abstaining was considered as an act of protest or apathy and implied a degree of social discontent and loss of political faith.

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<sup>8</sup> Even so, Greek-Cypriot trust levels of the political system remained comparatively higher than in other EU member states (Katsourides 2013a).



**Figure 1: Voter turnout by election type in the RoC (1970-2019)**

Source: IDEA n.d.

Following this pattern, typical forms of political participation became largely absent from Greek-Cypriot civic culture. In the 2018 European Social Survey<sup>9</sup>, the RoC scored below average for interest in political affairs, with only 21.8% of respondents expressing interest. Its findings indicate that only a minority of the Greek-Cypriot population trusted its politicians (approx. 10%), believed that the political system allows citizens to have a say in government decisions (33%), or actively participated in political processes. Specifically, a mere 8.4% signed petitions, 7.5% posted about politics online, 6.5% joined lawful public demonstrations, and 4.2% worked in political groups. Among the few exceptions of demonstrations were those following the Mari explosion and those prior to the signing of the 2013 bailout agreement (Katsourides 2014b). Nonetheless, the demands established during both protests were ignored by the respective governments, indicating that this form of activism did not produce the desired results in the Greek-Cypriot political landscape. Therefore, the expectation that change could occur through such actions was essentially removed from the collective imaginary. This attitude contributed to an atmosphere of political apathy that nourished a culture of ‘couch activism’, in which individuals, particularly the youth, preferred to “*watch events, evaluate developments and formulate opinions while sitting on his/her couch at home*”<sup>10</sup> without sharing their opinions in the public sphere (Katsourides 2013a). Consequently, acts of political activism and collective mobilization

<sup>9</sup> Evaluating data from the two previous years – the 2016 European Social Survey did not include Cyprus.

<sup>10</sup> The findings of the 2016 Eurobarometer revealed that 72% of Greek-Cypriots receive information about politics predominantly from television, while only a minority through newspapers.

remained minimal, mostly passive, and largely symbolic – raising concerns about the efficacy of democratic governance if examined through the lens of democratic theory whose premise is built on the assumption that individuals are inherently political animals.

This apathy seems paradoxical given that the history and political past of countries often determines the degree of political participation of its citizens. Accordingly, the unresolved Cyprus problem should have caused a considerably high level of political involvement. However, as noted above, Greek-Cypriots did not believe that political participation could play a role in improving their standard of living (Katsourides 2015). In addition, the fact that citizens are lawfully obliged to vote and serve in the army (for men) and follow a civil defence course (for women) could be seen as sufficient to fulfil their civic duties. At the same time, the absence of a strong civil society presence that encourages political participation, in tandem to the low cumulative power of membership in trade unions could have also contributed to this phenomenon (CIVICUS 2005; Katsourides 2012). These factors raise the question of whether the weak state of political activism is an implicit effect of neoliberal policies and if this in turn triggers a process of de-politicisation, accompanied by the complete eradication of regulatory institutions and frameworks. The replacement of the collective nature of political mobilization by a process of individualisation of political demands points to that direction. As Katsourides (2013a) put it, “*one feeds the other and both feed abstention and indifference. (...) Negative sentiments about the political and party system are mounting and could transform into an opposition to the system itself rather than merely opposition to the political office holders*”. In essence, as the sense of collegiality and the power of collective action loses its meaning, citizen engagement seems worthless. Meanwhile, public exacerbation intensifies, having serious repercussions on democracy. Dissatisfied voters turn to politicians, political parties, and ideals who are critical of mainstream political agendas, thus enabling far-right populist parties to capitalize on the fragmentation of the political and party systems.

Katsourides (2016a) claims that there were nominal effects on the Greek-Cypriot political and party systems when compared to other Southern European countries. Although there was low social turmoil and the crystallization of mainstream parties remained relatively unchanged during the 2016 Parliamentary election, this theory cannot be applied on the sudden prominence of ELAM. By then, ELAM’s support grew from 0.8% to 2.69% from 2013 to 2014, indicating an abrupt increase in radical decisions and interest in non-mainstream politics. Katsourides’ argument also overlooks the findings of Triga and Papa (2015) on the emergence of a new trend of political activism as a direct consequence of the extremity of the bailout agreement in the RoC. The study shows that social media offered a novel space for collective action through Facebook groups. This became an outlet for people of all

socioeconomic backgrounds to express their dissatisfaction with the rescue plan and austerity measures, blaming the President for following a self-serving political agenda, and demanding the RoC's exit from the Eurozone or the default of the national economy. Collective identity was therefore formed through either ideologically informed nationalism or a persistent anti-president and anti-government rhetoric, which became further politicised as the crisis evolved. What both dynamics have in common is the power to create a sense of unity that overcomes existing differences and is a cause for mobilization. Evidently, the crisis triggered the establishment of a politicised collective identity, formed through shared grievances and/or common political interests. The outburst of such sentiments indicates a growing desire for people to regain power, which in turn implies a degree of politicisation in which collective action is seen as more and more necessary. Nevertheless, the danger of this phenomenon lies in the way in which it can be capitalized by political parties.

The increasing lack of public trust towards political actors and institutions fuelled a crisis of representation that further destabilized the party system. As politics became polarized and volatilized, there were greater electoral insurgencies in which unconventional, and often radicalized politicians and party agendas were preferred over mainstream ones. At the same time, the inability of political parties to build long-standing and effective governing coalitions cannot be ruled out as a contributing factor to this growing distrust of the party system. This goes back to the deficiencies of the wider political and party systems, if we consider that the way that the Republic's political system is structured – compelling political parties and actors to depend on the formation of political alliances because one candidate or party can rarely gain majority alone<sup>11</sup> – implies a constantly changing yet cooperative dynamic among mainstream parties to secure political power (Katsourides 2013a). This resulted in “*party re-alignment or de-alignment, increased party system volatility and the emergence of non-mainstream parties*”, analogous to other Southern European cases (Charalambous 2012; Triga 2017). At the time of the 2013 elections, there was an unprecedented increase of candidates (11 in total), abstention rates (16.8% in the first round and 18.4% in the second), and voting outside traditional party loyalties<sup>12</sup> (idem). This revealed a growing rejection of mainstream parties alongside a desire to disrupt bipartisan party politics and renew the political system. Meanwhile, participation in electoral campaigns shrank, reflecting the deeper changing dynamics between citizens, political parties, and political participation (Katsourides 2015).

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11 The structure of the party system in the RoC was until then caught up in a tri-partisan warfare: DIKO (centre-right), DISY (right-wing), and AKEL (left-wing); followed by EDEK (social democrats).

12 Party loyalties are contingent on a system of party patronage and the unresolved ethnic conflict (Katsourides 2014b). There is a deeply instilled clientelist tradition that acts as “*an important vehicle of integration in the political system and a form of political participation*” (Katsourides 2013a).

The appeal of populist rhetoric was visibly on the rise by then, echoing the loss of faith in mainstream politics and structures, with an anti-Troika and anti-federation candidate, George Lillikas (independent), ranking third at the Presidential elections, followed by ELAM's candidate, George Charalambous (Central Electoral Service 2013). According to Zanotti and Rama (2020), during socioeconomic crises, mainstream parties tend to be cast out while peripheral parties benefit, particularly in hardly hit countries. In the RoC, this phenomenon unfolded even further during the 2016 legislative election which saw a record number of candidates (494 for 56 seats) and political parties (18). In an attempt to curb this trend before the elections, DISY and AKEL passed a bipartisan electoral law that increased the institutional threshold for parliamentary representation from 1.8% to 3.6%, (idem). Nevertheless, this strategy failed as support for non-mainstream parties rose steadily (e.g. ELAM, Citizen's Alliance, Solidarity Movement, Green Party). ELAM acquired two seats by marginally surpassing the new electoral threshold, gaining 3.7%, while all mainstream parties saw their electoral base either moderately or dramatically decline (Central Electoral Service 2016). This election thus epitomizes the loss of momentum of mainstream parties and marks the beginning of ELAM's electoral success and substantiation of its rhetoric, actions, and values.

### **The winning ticket: Substantiating ELAM's rhetoric**

To fully grasp what facilitated ELAM's success, it is important to understand how its rhetoric and tactics offered an approach that set it apart within the Greek-Cypriot political spectrum. Firstly, ELAM's self-preserving image echoes a mission aiming to prove how different the party was from other parties in the eyes of politically disengaged or apathetic groups. The dissemination of anti-establishment rhetoric and critiques against the political system were centre-stage throughout ELAM's 2016 electoral campaign, whilst portraying itself as a lawful and uncorrupted party was an essential feature of its strategy (see ELAM 2016 for example). By questioning the effective execution of the Republic's democratic system, it added onto the delegitimization of the political system and was thereby able to capitalize not only on the society's underlying dissatisfaction with the implications of a neoliberal integrated system, but also on the renewed desire for action. By doing so, its discourse and political agenda became more appealing to socially and economically vulnerable groups, disenchanting voters, and the unemployed (Chatzistylianou 2019). This generated a heterogeneous support base that had common grievances and determination to overcome them. In short, voting for ELAM was considered a form of protest and holding national and regional actors accountable.

Further, ELAM's 2016 campaign agenda revolved around its robust opposition of any type of reunification of the island by insisting on the establishment of a unitary non-bicommunal state, despite the suspended negotiations for a peace settlement (Triga 2017; UNFICYP n.d.). The significance of

this issue lies in its ability to form another axis of political and electoral competition as it has conventionally been the main criterion for Greek-Cypriot voters (Loizides 2012; Triga & Papa 2015). Although the 2016 elections were the first ones in which the Cyprus problem was outshined by the deteriorating state of the economy, it still remained high on voters' decision-making list (Politis 2019). This does not mean that other political parties did not adopt an anti-reunification stance, quite the contrary. Most, if not all, parties were against the creation of a bi-communal bi-zonal federation, in the exception of DISY and AKEL (Christophorou 2007). What set ELAM apart was its attempt to revive the EOKA spirit, which not only reignited an ebullition of fervour for the 'liberation' of the island from the hands of the 'enemy', but also promised drastic and uncompromising action. This offered hope to an inherent fear built on the construction of a perceived security threat tied to ethnic identity, externalized through an intense resentment of immigration. The positive reception of ELAM's rhetoric reflected public demands for strong leadership, homogeneity, and national identity (Katsourides 2013c), especially among traditionally right-wing voters, given that DISY, the among the few political groups – and certainly the only right-wing one – that fervently campaigned in favour of a 'yes' vote in the 2004 referendum and has henceforth persisted as a supporter of a political settlement on the island, alongside AKEL (Loizides 2012). In fact, appealing to cross-party voters was relatively easy to achieve in the RoC because mainstream parties traditionally gathered a wide voter basis spanning across the entire socioeconomic spectrum (Charalambous 2012). A key tactic exploited by ELAM was cultivating a culture of fanaticism based on the reinvigoration of racist and xenophobic discourse by primarily targeting politically disengaged youths in schools, universities, and football games (Katsourides 2013c). Their indoctrination included weekly lectures for party and youth members, gatherings, rallies and anti-occupation protests during which ELAM members preached about the heroic acts of EOKA<sup>13</sup> fighters, promoted hate speech, chanted anti-Turkish slogans, and on occasion burnt the TRNC flag while proclaiming that "Cyprus is Greek" (e.g. ELAM 2015a, 2015b). Consequently, ELAM was able to (re)invigorate their interest in political participation through the promise of preserving the 'Greek race' in Cyprus.

ELAM also focused on the politicisation (and oversimplification) of issues that were not typically addressed within mainstream politics, such as migration, by taking advantage of economic grievances to target voters more inclined to cross-cut partisan allegiances. This approach is in line with the primary characteristics of far-right populist parties, namely, extreme nationalism, authoritarianism, nativism, and democratic illiberalism; all of which manifest as polemical tools tapping into public exasperation

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<sup>13</sup> EOKA (National Organization of Cypriot Struggle) was a Greek-Cypriot guerilla resistance movement that fought to end British colonial rule on the island, active from 1955 to 1959 (Ioannou 2019).

(Mudde 2007; Urbinati 2019). Their connecting point is the construction of a distinct national identity – often implying its superiority. By demonizing the ‘other’, they construct an ‘enemy’ who is discursively portrayed as posing an existential threat to the proper functioning of society and the purity of the nation’s identity. In this respect, ELAM repeatedly points to the significance of a national crisis to designate the influx of migrants as a threat to national security, identity and prosperity. Based on this assessment, party supporters project antagonism through exhaustive employment of ultranationalist messages conveying conflict-based collective imaginaries (Charalambous & Christoforou 2018; Finchelstein 2017). The effect of this approach is reflected in how the issue of migration gained wider prominence among the Greek-Cypriot society, deemed as the second most important issue facing the country in 2016 after unemployment (2016 Eurobarometer), surpassing the economic situation which was classified second in 2014, compared to migration at fourth position (2014 Eurobarometer).

The success of this approach is worth further examination given that although there were no substantial transformations regarding the Cyprus question to create specific conditions that would provide fertile ground for ELAM’s rise, its approach to the Cyprus problem remained central for its voters. Abbas (2017) argues that in the aftermath of the Cold War, the way in which security issues were understood and interpreted transformed, with politicians and the media being the driving forces of this turn. Immigrants have been identified as potential threats that are critical to the weakening of state security, particularly following the increase in terrorist attacks in Western countries. This perception can in turn make the racist and xenophobic behaviour and rhetoric of extreme-right populist parties more relevant and appealing. Other scholars attribute it to the idea that the presence of immigrants in a specific country or continent is responsible for the creation of that country’s socioeconomic problems<sup>14</sup> (Tasci 2019). Whereas, Eatwell and Goodwill (2018) claim that this is because the vast majority of Western populations are strongly committed and attached to their country, and thus raise popular concerns regarding the demographic and cultural risks involved in such a rapid process of ethnic change. Therefore, through efforts to politicize “*demands for national identity (nationalism), homogeneity (xenophobia) and for order, hierarchy, and strong leadership (authoritarianism)*”, the appeal of far-right populist parties grows (Katsourides 2013c).

In this light, cultural/social grievances are seen as central to ELAM’s success, implying that the emotional reaction to growing fears of immigration and the destruction of the ‘Greek’ national identity are mutually exclusive to financial prosperity (Inglehart & Norris 2016). However, there are significant

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<sup>14</sup> i.e. lower wages, higher unemployment, increased crime rate, reduction of educational standards in schools.



gaps in allocating absolute importance on cultural grievances when explaining the rise of such an overly complex phenomenon, as it cannot be justified through merely one factor. Eatwell and Goodwin (2018) point out that in realistic terms, culture and economics often influence and interact with each other, and are hence both responsible for the outbreak of such a phenomenon. Nonetheless, this perspective overlooks a crucial aspect: while cultural grievances act as fuel for populism, they fail to scrutinize the fundamental reasons behind its emergence, overlooking the factors that created an environment conducive to the flourishing of external threats to national identity and prosperity. Instead, this paper demonstrates that the reason for the prominence of social grievances was the importance allocated to them within ELAM's discourse, during a period of both political and economic instability that left room for the substantiation of language blaming both external and internal factors for the public's distress. By designating both internal and external enemies, parties like ELAM are able to galvanize the masses and deepen their frustrations while portraying themselves as the only ones who can effectively address existing socioeconomic problems since they are themselves excluded from the mainstream, reflected through their absent media presence (Gonzalez-Vicente & Carroll 2017). The adoption of such an extreme form of nationalism is inextricably linked to the prioritisation of the interests of the native population. In ELAM's case, a good example is its support of exiting the Troika agreement and Eurozone as a solution for economic recovery, while portraying itself as the only party that can truly protect the people (see ELAM 2014). Similarly, ELAM took a page from GD's handbook and actively organized charitable efforts strictly for Greek-Cypriots (e.g. blood donations, assistance to fire-fighters, donations of food and school material) (Signalive 2013) as a means to fuel even more its anti-mainstream narrative and protective role vis-à-vis ordinary people. The recurrent use of such tactics demonstrates ELAM's propensity to exploit anti-establishment and anti-democratic popular resentment at the right moment; a typical populist rhetorical strategy.

As Rao, Raschky, and Tombazos (2018) argue, fluctuations in incomes, even if small, can push people towards extremist parties. When people are in an economically disadvantaged position, racist perceptions have the power to aggravate popular concerns and cultivate further alienation amongst society. This tendency allows for political parties to appeal to affected citizens through the politicisation of demands that emerge alongside economic deterioration, namely, national prioritisation, identity, and homogeneity. There is available space within the political sphere for populist parties to validate their hitherto non-mainstream and extreme approach focusing on the aforementioned demands (Mounk 2018). Hence, cultural grievances grow as a by-product of widespread economic suffering and distrust of the political system. Politico-economic factors therefore had more weight in ELAM's ability to break established electoral thresholds, particularly by playing

on the revelations of the multifaceted crisis: the globalised liberal democratic system does not serve first and foremost the people, but instead, it works to advance the profits of the few while safeguarding the sustainability of the system (Chomsky 2011). The faults of liberal democracy thus created conditions which left available space for the substantiation of ELAM's rhetoric among politically apathetic or disenchanted groups, thereby drawing a direct link between the success of far-right populist rhetoric and its contingency to the state of the economy and political sphere.

## **Conclusion**

The election of ELAM for the first time in the House of Representatives in 2016 was a watershed moment for the political history of the RoC. Similar to far-right populist parties across the world, ELAM's campaign focused on the promotion of anti-establishment, anti-immigration, and racist discourse. Nonetheless, its rhetoric is not enough to explain the roots of the causal factors that facilitated ELAM's success. Employing a political economy analytical framework exposed the ways in which the failures of an integrated liberal democratic system manifested in the RoC and contributed to ELAM's rise. The plunging turns of the economy after 2008 not only created deep financial grievances but also triggered a political crisis, which destabilized the political system by undermining the sovereignty of both national and EU institutions. Under Christofias, a chain of ideologically-rooted decisions and abnormal deviations worsened and prolonged the hardships of the community. Though this had negative consequences on the incumbent and his party, the implications on the political system were far greater, becoming more evident in the aftermath of the bailout agreement in 2013. The inability of neither the Christofias nor the Anastasiades administrations to freely regulate the economy as an EU member, particularly the inevitable imposition of Troika's rescue plan demonstrated that the EU's overwhelming powers dictate the (limited) tools with which states can autonomously govern. Consequently, this nourished public disinterestedness and alienation from political processes. Once political participation no longer seemed as a viable stepping-stone for effective improvements of public grievances, the de-politicisation of society was inevitable. Meanwhile, the realisation that mainstream parties failed to procure economic and political stability transformed the landscape of the party system by shaking their continuous domination while enhancing the appeal of non-mainstream parties. These triggered a sense of radicalisation, as certain groups became more easily motivated to mobilize behind a party who presented itself as capable of effectively addressing common grievances. By inspiring a renewed, radicalized political activism, ELAM exploited growing public dissatisfaction and exasperation towards mainstream governance, particularly its rigid and exclusionist approach to the country's ethnic conflict.

Simply put, four interconnected factors facilitated ELAM's rise in 2016. First, the emergence of a politico-economic crisis was decisive in tainting the sovereignty of political actors, institutions, and the system as a whole. Second, EU integration played a significant role in the acceleration of this process. Consequently, a multifaceted crisis broke out, discrediting the party system and cultivating an era of de-politicisation of society that left room for ELAM to awaken a sense of unity and the necessity for political mobilization amongst society. This paved the way for ELAM to stand out and use the crisis in its favour. The latter two factors were implicit effects of the former ones, but all four enabled ELAM's rise. Ultimately, these factors demonstrate the underlying faults of an integrated system of governance, which produce conditions that make the rhetoric and agenda promoted by far-right populist parties more relevant and appealing. If these circumstances did not occur, then it would have been more difficult, even perhaps impossible, for their approaches to be substantiated. ELAM thereby thrived in a climate of economic adversities, public disillusionment with the political and party systems, and renewed forms of political participation, without offering concrete, suitable, nor achievable solutions that deal with the issues at hand. Even though the traditional dominance of mainstream parties prevailed at the 2016 elections, notwithstanding the challenge of ELAM's unprecedented triumph, it is evident that there is no room to reverse this trend in the RoC as long as the failures of liberal democratic governance, outlined in this paper, are not addressed.

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