

# The Silent Phenomenon of Euroscepticism in Cyprus

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## Abstract

Accession to the European Union is a new chapter in the history of a country. The European project aims at peace, security, freedom, and social justice, the elimination of discrimination, respect for diversity, social and economic development, the promotion of democratic values and the protection of human rights. At the same time, it relies on the establishment of an internal market and a monetary union, as every member state should adopt the euro. Cyprus entered the EU in 2004, because of the prospects and the benefits the island could enjoy within the Union, similarly to any other member state. However, being a *de facto* divided country since 1974 when Turkey invaded the island, Cyprus constitutes a unique case within the EU. The Cyprus problem and the Turkish demands over the island make EU membership a necessity for the stability of the island. Therefore, while in other countries Eurosceptic politics flourish or are on the rise, in Cyprus Euroscepticism poses a minor threat. The party system on the island revolves around the Cyprus problem and the political culture is influenced, to a very great extent, by this national problem. Hence, while in other member states Eurosceptics preach that the EU undermines the sovereignty of their countries, in Cyprus the EU is seen as a guarantor of the island's sovereignty and security. In this article, we start our analysis with an examination of the theoretical framework and a description of the two interrelated terms: Euroscepticism and populism. Then, we explore the phenomenon of Euroscepticism in the EU and how it affects the politics of the member states. The analysis reaches the conclusion that because of the Cyprus problem, Cyprus constitutes a case where Euroscepticism has no serious foothold.

**Keywords:** the EU, Cyprus problem, populism, Euroscepticism, party system

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## Introduction: Euroscepticism and populism

As Szczerbiak and Taggart (2008: 240) explain, “the term Euroscepticism has emerged relatively recently as a concept derived from journalistic discourse rather than political science.” Euroscepticism, as a generic term, refers to opposition to the EU and European integration. In their effort to analyse European integration, theorists attempted to adjust the term, but encountered “a number of conceptual difficulties” (even though some authors approached the term with enhanced analytical precision).

Although Euroscepticism and populism are two distinct terms, within the context of the EU they are widely regarded as interrelated phenomena or even synonyms. A prominent reason is the fact that any criticism of the EU, which could denote Euroscepticism, has been seen and characterised as populism. Of course, another basic reason is the deep commitment of Eurosceptic politicians to populist rhetoric. According to Agh “populism and Euroscepticism are twin phenomena, and populism has emerged basically, although not exclusively, as Euro-populism, an anti-EU movement and mentality” (Agh, 2019: 155).

In essence though, populism should be considered the generic framework that includes different types of discourses, and Euroscepticism belongs to this wider cluster – as a specific type of populism. Euroscepticism could be defined as an expression of populism, whose primary goal is to stand against the EU and its institutions. Frequently, Eurosceptic politicians consider the EU the manifestation of elitism and centralisation.

Defining populism can be a challenge, as there is no coherent or concrete definition. Besides, populism is characterised by a multidimensional concept (Adinolfi, 2020) with different definitions, even though theorists agree on some basic features. The rise of populism in the EU today raises concerns, although it is not a new phenomenon. In contrast, according to Balfour, “in Europe it has been a force to be reckoned with at least since the 1980s and an object of extensive study” (Balfour, 2017: 56), but it appeared before that in other regions (Balfour et al., 2019). Populists, in general, present themselves as the representatives of the people, who are ready to protect them from the corrupt elites, the foreigners and the supporters of the EU institutions (Balfour, 2017). Aggressiveness, anti-elitism, nationalist rhetoric and a reactionary approach, which frequently becomes harsh criticism against mainstream politics and systems, constitute basic characteristics of populism. Hence, it attracts people who feel excluded from the EU vision for a globalised and cosmopolitan world. Populist leaders are mainly “charismatic leaders”, who in their rhetoric try to protect the rights of “ordinary” people (Ruzza, 2019). As a result, populism recruits “personalistic appeals through a charismatic leader”, decorated with emotional speeches, which is a basic characteristic of demagoguery (Charalambous, 2018: 26).

A main objective of populism is to establish a connection between a charismatic leader and the people, and subsequently challenge democratic structures. Populist leaders call on people to participate in every decision of the state, as “any populist discourse has the people as its main source of legitimation” (Adinolfi, 2020: 144). That said, the observer needs to take into account that the main opponent of populism is not democracy as such,

“but liberal and representative democracy” (Ibidem.). Populism could be characterised as a “special type of simplified, black-and-white political discourse”, whose goal is to show “democracy’s main national and regional deficiencies” (Agh, 2019: 154). A charismatic leader comes to give justice, as the patron of the ordinary people who have been treated unfairly by the elites. Populism, then, becomes a “messianic worldview”, as the charismatic leader comes to defeat the enemy (the elites), blending conservative values with liberalism and socialism (Ibid.: 155). As such, the concept of a political messiah becomes the cornerstone of populism around the world.

The observer can detect a strong connection between populism and democracy, since they have developed together. As Mastropaolo says, the interesting point “is not just the fact that there is discontent with how democracies are governed and function, but the link between this phenomenon and populism” (Mastropaolo, 2008: 37). According to Pasquino (2008: 15), the strong link between these two concepts exists because “both have firm and solid roots in the people” and “indicate the paramount importance of the people”. The populist leader “will persist with the representative claim no matter what” (Müller, 2016: 39). While non-populists “do not propose in rousing speeches to speak merely for a faction”, populist leaders use a convincing type of language that aims at criticising the elites (without asserting that every criticism of the elites is populism) and present themselves as the ones who should represent the “true people” (Ibidem.). In essence, populism should be seen as “the permanent shadow of representative politics”, where charismatic leaders become people’s “legitimate representatives” (Ibid.: 101-102). However, the doctrine remains unclear.

In the absence of a single and precise populist ideology, it would be safer to use the plural form “ideologies” or “mentalities”. Populist politicians “embrace the ideas and mentalities of the people and identify with them” (Pasquino, 2008: 20). They give promises which excite people’s imagination and please the ears of those who are unsatisfied with the current political status, although they avoid explanations on how to achieve the change (Ibid.). Critically, in their attempt to identify with the people’s wants, populists add new variants to an already overloaded concept of populism. Müller too claims that there is not such a thing like “a theory of populism” and, thus, no specific criteria “for deciding when political actors turn populist in some meaningful sense” (Müller, 2016: 2).

Elaborating on this discussion, whether populism is an ideology or a set of ideas, Charalambous (2018: 26) asserts that despite the disagreements of theorists and scholars on the matter, there is agreement on two main features: the first one is the characteristic of “people-centrism”, which gives an “emphasis on the people as a sovereign, virtuous subject” and the second one is “otherness”, which manifests “itself into both anti-elitism or an anti-establishment stance”.

Populism is present in different democracies and in various forms, but, as Bocancea claims, “practising this type of propaganda without the specific aim of an ideology is harmful for any democracy” (Bocancea, 2020: 80). As regards the critical question, whether populism constitutes an ideology or a set of ideas with basic aim demagoguery, he explains

that there is “no doctrine core to populism, because the latter is not an ideology” (Ibidem.). Populism should be seen as “a propaganda technique that rallies ‘people’ around a topic that ensures electoral success” (Ibidem.). Perhaps, what populist politicians share in common is their political trend to exploit “the feeling of insecurity”, through propaganda (Ibid.: 86).

The fundamental distinction between “the pure people” and “the corrupt elite” seems to lie at the core of populist discourse (Balfour et al., 2019: 4). Populism attacks elitism and, thus, adopts an anti-elitist rhetoric – which frequently ignores, intentionally, the fact that the populist leader is a member of the very same elite. In essence, the “people – elites” distinction gives populism a “moralistic” nuance and constitutes one of its core features. Populist politicians plan their speeches accordingly, relying on the simplification of political ideas and values (Ibidem.). An important parameter is the fact that the growing populism of our era is related to globalisation, of which the EU could be seen as a striking example (Bergh and Kärnä, 2021).

In the 2010s there was a rise of populist movements, with the Brexit campaign and Donald Trump’s victory in the US standing as two landmarks in the decade (Ruzza, 2019). Agh (2019: 153) states that the outcomes of the Brexit referendum and Trump’s victory in the US have been seen internationally as “a populist explosion”. These two events have been characterised as “populist political events”, which signified a reaction against immigration, expressed scepticism about globalisation, and concerns about security (de Búrca, 2018: 47).

What helped the populists, notably in the EU, to spread their rhetoric was their relation with the media. In Balfour’s words, “populists have managed to gain space in the media, not just by contributing to the debate but by shaping it and its vocabulary.” Populists used the media as a “megaphone to [their] populist call” (Balfour, 2017: 58). Commenting on this relationship of the populist leader with the media, Mazzoleni writes that “in most cases, [populist leaders] are charismatic figures and possess a great deal of media savvy” and also claims that populist politicians show “flamboyant personalities and pursue highly contentious agendas that attract media scrutiny” (Mazzoleni, 2008: 49).

In addition, when the observer deals with populism, s/he needs to have in mind the binary distinction between “soft” populism and “hard” populism. According to Agh (2017: 8), while soft populism focuses on “internal enemies” and has “domestic orientation”, hard populism targets the EU and its institutions. Thus, the latter becomes “Euroscepticism”. Agh (2019: 153) also declares, “soft populism and hard populism have to be distinguished not only analytical but also historically.” Soft populism emerged with the “deep people-elite dichotomy from the actual reduction of politics’ arena”, and is related to the socio-economic isolation of people from political developments (Ibidem.). On the other hand, hard populism is related to the “protracted global crisis”, which led to a feeling of discontent among people. This dissatisfaction triggered reactions and resulted in an open attack against the political elites, which were considered responsible for the crisis (Ibidem.).

On the same dichotomy, Szczerbiak and Taggart explain that it was implemented “for the specific purpose of conducting basic, comparative empirical research on the manifestation of Euroscepticism in European party systems” (Szczerbiak and Taggart, 2008:

241). Even though each type of Euroscepticism has its own characteristics, it is important to note that the dichotomy may be modified over time. It is also true that the concept of soft Euroscepticism can be very broad and includes parties that expressed a pro-European orientation.

It is widely accepted that populist leaders have found the fertile ground to develop their rhetoric in the last decades; thus, populism appears to be a major issue in several European countries. In their discourse, populist leaders make mention of referenda, presenting them as the manifestation of direct democracy that promotes people's voice, and secures national sovereignty and interests. As such, the populist discourse capitalises on people's emotions, fears and disappointment (Lazar, 2021). In a broad sense, populist politicians exploit the weaknesses of democratic systems and build policies where democracy fails.

## **Methodology**

The methodology of this study is an integrated literature review – with a case study component, where we explore existing research and compare its findings with the case of Cyprus. Through a critical analysis of the current body of knowledge and a comparison with other countries, where Euroscepticism has a strong presence, the reasons are explained why the phenomenon of Euroscepticism remains a silent one in Cyprus. Where necessary, the discussion is augmented with statements and declarations from certain political parties and their members.

In terms of the benefits of this methodology, it is important to say that an exploration of various sources from the existing bibliography provides the observer with a holistic understanding. Through a thorough critical evaluation of research, we identify the gaps and apply theoretical innovation. After investigating the notion of Euroscepticism and how it affected EU states in general, we turn to the case of Cyprus and identify its key differences – compared to other states. An understanding of the nature of the Cyprus problem sheds light on why Euroscepticism is not a major concern.

## **A Union under pressure**

Although with the accession to the EU the member states “subscribed to a set of objectives and limitations” (Biscop, 2018: 2), criticism of EU policies can be reasonable and healthy. The burning question is whether this criticism becomes a productive dialogue or an open attack against EU institutions. The emergence of far-right parties within the EU constitutes “a political failure” (Bergh and Kärnä, 2021: 66). If anything, the growing power of these parties poses a problem that the observer and politicians cannot ignore.

In general, the factors that cause Eurosceptic trends could be summarised as follows: unemployment, insecurity, immigration and xenophobic trends. All together create an anti-EU stance (Kaeding et al., 2021), which has been fuelled by the ongoing EU crisis – that has been analysed, predominantly, as an economic crisis. Nevertheless, it would not be

an exaggeration to say that it became a crisis with social, cultural and political dimensions (Ionescu et al., 2019). This socio-political condition has been exploited by certain populist parties in Europe which sought to strengthen the national feeling. One needs to acknowledge that the EU was an easy target for populist circles, as representative democracy has been “dominated by a legal or formalistic approach to EU democracy” (Agh, 2017: 12). According to Bakare et al. (2019: 5), “the rise of contemporary European populism has raised many questions and generated debates.”

It is imperative to note that both, the left and the right, seek refuge to populist rhetoric in order to achieve their goals. As Agh explains, identity politics became “the flagship for populist politics” for left and right parties. In their effort to criticise EU policies, the populists “have used ‘Brussels’ as a bugaboo for the consolidation of autocratic regimes” (Ibidem.). Thus, the presence of extremism poses a challenge for the EU (Ionescu et al., 2019). A substantial difference between right-wing populism and left-wing populism is that the former has a nationalist orientation and agenda (Balfour, 2017). In Ruzza’s words, “right-wing populism is typically exclusionary, while left-wing populism is typically inclusionary, but changes in political context may move populist formations along the left-right axis” (Ruzza, 2019: 121). In a similar vein, Lazar (2021) claims that left-wing populism promotes inclusivity, as opposed to its right wing counterpart that promotes nationalism. In the same vein, Charalambous (2018) claims that populism constitutes a basic trait of the right in its effort to promote xenophobia, but it can be a characteristic of the left, as well as centric parties. Balfour et al. (2019: 5) also state that the general concept of populism is such that “it can be closer to either or both traditional left or right positions”. Similarly, Surel (2011) declares that there is left-wing populism and right-wing populism and this depends on the people and the elites.

For Lazar (2021), a significant point of convergence is that populist leaders from both political spectra share the same aggressiveness against the elites, but the irony is that these leaders are frequently part of this corrupt system. On the same binary distinction, Gandesha (2018: 63) asserts that “right-wing or authoritarian populism defines the enemy in personalized terms”; this enemy can be Islamic terrorism, refugees or the European Commission. In contrast, “left-wing populism tends to define the enemy in terms of bearers of socio-economic structures and rarely as particular groups”. However, there are cases where left-wing populism can be authoritarian too (Ibidem.). Berend (2021: 201) claims that both left-wing and right-wing populism present the same “revolt against the establishment” and advocate “radical change”. Frequently, this populist discourse is expressed by billionaires who present themselves as “anti-establishment, self-sacrificing saviours of ‘the people’”, a practice, which is successful in particular with poor people and workers in unemployment (Ibid.: 202). Essentially, populism is characterised by adaptability and a “chameleonic nature”, which changes based on the different circumstances of the time (Charalambous et al., 2018: 456). Although right-wing populism and left-wing populism might have distinct characteristics, they constitute grey areas with blurred boundaries.

There are Eurosceptic parties (ruling parties or not) in several EU countries, including Poland, Greece, France, Slovakia, Spain, the Netherlands, Ireland, Portugal, the Scandinavian countries and elsewhere (Agh, 2017; see also Balfour, 2017). Although the general belief is that populism emerged as a reaction to the economic crisis, this is not always the case. It would be a very simplified explanation, for example, to say that in the Netherlands and Scandinavia, Euroscepticism was the result of the economic crisis (Balfour, 2017). In certain cases populist parties have been elected and formed governments. A striking example is the Orban government in Hungary, as previous criticism have dealt extensively with the matter. Agh claims that “Viktor Orban’s governments have been developing and implementing a three-step master plan for a complete populist takeover.” The Orban government changed Hungary from a “weak democracy into a stable autocratic regime” (Agh, 2017: 19).

Some years ago, the Berlusconi government in Italy “pursued restrictive immigration policies to satisfy the xenophobic junior coalition party Northern League” (Balfour, 2017: 57). Current Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni also followed a Eurosceptic line, which gradually changed, though, to a softer approach (Martinez, 2023; see also Brotman, 2022). Here emerges the reasonable question about the very nature of populism and whether it is a reactive rhetoric of opposition, and once in power, it complies, to a certain extent, with the EU structures. In some views, Meloni’s goal is to follow the example of Orban in Hungary (The Economist, 2024/a: 18). Based on the same source, “speaking by video-link to the crowd in Madrid, [Meloni] lambasted the European Commission” and characterised it a “bureaucratic giant” (The Economist, 2024/c: 23).

Balfour claims that in some member states certain anti-democratic forces are on the rise and seem to be “unhindered”, while “populist leaders bypass traditional institutions essential to representative democracy”. Politics is moving “in debating arenas to unilateral Twitter feeds and Facebook posts” (Balfour, 2019: 4). Populists exploit the gaps of democratic systems and, thus, build their policies accordingly – attracting people who feel excluded or threatened and “democrats have not paid sufficient attention to the transfers of power that globalization and Europeanization have entailed” (Ibid.).

Brexit constitutes a landmark in the history of the EU, since, together with Trump’s election in 2017 (even though in the US), it rang a bell for the rest of Europe and was seen as a warning for potential consequences (Balfour, 2017). Essentially, Brexit became an important determinant, as it gave populist parties in other countries the grounds to enforce their arguments (Agh, 2017). The result of the Brexit referendum should not be seen as a spontaneous reaction to the EU policies, as in the UK there are certain circles who envisage the future of the country outside the EU for a long time now. UKIP, a small party, was seemingly behind the result of the referendum, but as Balfour explained, “UKIP was the trigger of the call for the referendum, not the cause” (Balfour, 2017: 59). Interestingly, UKIP was the only organised party, which demanded the exit of the UK from the EU – a position that became its flagship for many years (Donnelly, 2021). Brexit, inevitably, resulted in a totally new state, as the UK is obliged to reconsider its relationship with the EU. But certainly, this is a new situation for the EU too, which has lost an important member state.



As Sampson states, “Brexit raises questions about the future stability of the EU and the extent to which further globalization is inevitable” (Sampson, 2017: 163). In Rodriguez’s words, the Brexit populist rhetoric was built around the existence of a “problem”, which was the EU, and an “enemy”, which were the immigrants. The outcome of the referendum should be seen in connection to a “feeling of superiority”, which developed into strong Euroscepticism (Rodriguez, 2020: 25, 28).

The Brexit campaign found support in certain groups, like the elderly and conservative voters, who wanted to express their objection to modernity and globalisation. However, whether the result of the referendum serves their interests remains doubtful. As Sampson explains, “it is too soon to know whether Britain leaving the European Union will prove merely a diversion on the path to greater integration, a sign that globalization has reached its limits, or the start of a new era of protectionism” (Sampson, 2017: 181). In essence, the future of the EU and the UK after Brexit remains to be seen and people can only make speculations on whether further fragmentation is likely to be the case.

Some authors refer to the “contagiousness” of populism, as a wave that affects the whole of Europe. In their words, “no country on the continent is safe from radical political agitation, either from the right or left” and this growing popularity of populism is evident in the performance of certain populist parties in Europe (Bakare and Sherazi, 2019: 10). Indeed, in the 2024 European elections, the far right secured a significant share of the vote: for example, in France the far-right National Rally came first with a percentage of 31.37%, while in Germany, the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) secured the second place – just behind the conservatives. This rise of the far right is evident in the results of other EU countries as well (Politico, 2024). An important dimension of these results is the fact that the far-right parties and politics in France, Germany, Poland and elsewhere became popular among the young population, who, generally speaking, have been considered to have a more leftist stance (Marsh et al., 2024). Cases like those of Geert Wilders in the Netherlands and Giorgia Meloni in Italy remain popular among the electorate. Wilders lost to the centre-left in the EU elections, but his percentage (17%) remains strong. In addition, some months ago, he won the most votes in the local elections. Meloni secured first place with a percentage of 28.76% (The Economist, 2024/b; see also The Economist, 2024/d).

This rise of populism in the EU shows that populist parties find fertile ground. Regardless of the benefits of EU membership, the popularity of Eurosceptic parties in the continent indicates that some people do not see these benefits as reasons that are enough for their country to be part of the European community. If anything, the percentages of Eurosceptic parties show that some Europeans have been convinced by populist circles and found refuge in the words of charismatic populist leaders. Hence, self-reflection becomes a necessity for the EU, whether it was meant to deal with the growing threat of Euroscepticism effectively or not, and address the whole issue through the proper means. According to Balfour, “there is scope for better understanding why society has become so divided and with such important consequences for the rest of the world” (Balfour, 2017: 60). According to some authors certain concerns emerged, because the EU has become undemocratic. What is



more, the EU has followed a trajectory, where it tends to “usurp authority which is eroding the sovereignty of member states through its institutions” (Bakare and Sherazi, 2019: 8). Hence, “one common critique of the European Union is that its institutions and working procedures are not democratic enough” (Berend, 2021: 80). The political and economic problems in the EU resulted in a feeling of discontent, which gave populist politicians the golden opportunity to build their rhetoric and blame others (predominantly the elites). As a result, the Eurosceptic discourse promotes the view that the EU is unable to keep its citizens happy and, thus, proved to be a failed project. The rising influence of Euroscepticism appears to be “a real threat to the current European order” (Usiak and Jankovska, 2020: 187), as with the flourish of extremist parties people become sceptical of traditional parties and seek shelter somewhere else. Therefore, radicalisation and extremism become tools in the hands of Eurosceptic politicians.

Assessment of the actual dimensions of the crisis and implementation of reforms become necessities for the EU to face these challenges. Brexit is only one aspect of a greater problem and the member states should seek solutions at the national and international level. The EU should champion political consensus and strengthen the bond among national governments (Ionescu et al., 2019). According to Ruzza, “Euroscepticism has in part emerged as a result of the EU’s failure to deal with state-wide nationalism” (Ruzza, 2018: 129). In the same spirit, Agh claims that “the EU must realize that populism is a symptom of real political failure, under the conditions of long standing economic malaise and mounting migration crisis”. In addition, there is an “increasing gap between the core and the periphery”, which can be an even more serious problem if this distinction becomes sharper in the near or far future (Agh, 2019: 156, 157). Consequently, the EU needs to acknowledge where they failed. On the other hand, it has proved easy to blame the EU for domestic problems (Sampson, 2017). Thus, for a constructive dialogue, the member states need to acknowledge their share in that and deal effectively with the growing populism in their domestic politics.

As regards the case of Brexit, in particular, although the referendum terminated a relationship of reciprocal doubts, the EU needs to examine the reasons that led the British electorate to this decision and the UK outside the Union. Indeed, the EU should deal with “the concerns about migration which resonated so successfully in the Brexit debate” and “the issues of economic security” (de Búrca, 2018: 52).

## **The case of Cyprus**

Considering the complex history of Cyprus and, notably the fact that the island is de facto divided after the Turkish invasion of 1974, the observer can see that EU membership constitutes a historical achievement. Beyond the feeling of safety the Cypriots can feel within the EU, a solution to the Cyprus problem can be planned based on the European framework. According to Bocancea (2020), when the observer deals with EU populism, s/he needs to bear in mind that each country presents its own characteristics, as it has its

own history, legacy and political reality. Naturally, when one studies the history of Cyprus, s/he can see that the Cyprus problem makes the island a *sui generis* case in the EU. That said, and with the national problem always present on the political agenda in Cyprus, the nationalist discourse prevails over populism (Venizelos, 2021: 799).

Euroscepticism has developed as a reaction against EU policies and institutions and became an effort to protect the nation from the EU. This explains why in their attempt to protect their culture and national identity, Eurosceptics usually attack the globalised concept of the EU. Nonetheless, in the case of Cyprus, given Turkey's demands on the island, protection and stability can only be ensured within the EU. Consequently, Euroscepticism has never grown to the levels the observer sees in other European countries.

In Cyprus, Euroscepticism has not become a major challenge, as the massive majority of the people and the traditional political powers acknowledge the benefits of EU membership. Thus, the call for an EU exit, which holds true elsewhere (Bakare and Sherazi, 2019), has never been central to the island's political life. Simply put, despite the spread of Euroscepticism, Cyprus' pro-EU attitude and orientation remain robust and this is reflected in the Cypriots' views, who trust the EU.

In 2013, Cyprus experienced an unprecedented financial crisis, which resulted in a haircut – imposed by the Eurogroup – on all uninsured deposits. Despite the reactions and the chaos this situation brought to the island, the criticism that followed did not result in an open attack against the Union; most importantly, it has never given rise to a concrete and stable anti-EU sentiment. As Katsourides explains, despite the damage, “a hard eurosceptic response proved to be only a fleeting moment and was not sustained”. He also claims that “Euroscepticism remains a background phenomenon in Cyprus”, as “eurosceptic attitudes had a brief moment of glory in the mid-2010s but have now declined” (Katsourides, 2020: 1, 24). It might be true that certain parties-movements emerged during the island's financial crisis and flirted with the political line of other Eurosceptic parties (Venizelos, 2021). However, these should be seen as sporadic outbursts of Euroscepticism, in the aftermath of the 2013 haircut. Despite their initial success, some of those parties proved short-lived or without widespread acceptance by the public.

Some analysts claim that the most “representative” example of populism in Cyprus today is ELAM, the extreme right party (which saw its percentage growing in the 2024 EU elections – exceeding the percentage of the Democratic Party for the first time). Among others, the rhetoric of ELAM revolves around the Greeks of Cyprus and the corrupt elites. ELAM's rhetoric “is defined by the prevalence of ethical codes over meaningful programmatic analysis” and there are internal “enemies”, such as other political parties, and external “enemies”, mainly Turkey and certain foreign circles. ELAM gives priority to the Greeks of Cyprus and undermines the role of immigrant communities on the island (Charalambous, 2018: 34). ELAM is “the sister party” of the Greek Golden Dawn (GD) and was established as “a GD branch in Cyprus” (Charalambous et al., 2018: 452). Nonetheless, despite its nationalist and anti-immigrant agenda, the party has never called for an EU exit.

In addition, although ELAM aligned with GD on the criticism of the EU bailout agreements, this never led to a strong protest from ELAM's side (Ibid.).

At this point, it suffices to mention the announcement of the party's press office (see ELAM, 2024) on the twenty-year anniversary of the island's accession to the EU: "It has been twenty years since Cyprus' accession to the EU. Undoubtedly, it was a historical day and we, as the National Popular Front (ELAM), praised several times the importance of Cyprus' accession to the European family". In addition, the announcement acknowledges the importance of collaboration with European countries: "The collaboration with European powers and countries, which realise and adopt the interests of our country, is imperative". So, despite the party's anti-immigrant rhetoric, which is reminiscent of other Eurosceptic parties, at the time of writing ELAM does not accuse the EU and its policies nor calls for an EU exit (like, for example, UKIP in the UK). If the party has ever adopted a Eurosceptic attitude, this should be seen as a case of soft Euroscepticism.

If one looks at the other axis of the political spectrum on the island and turns to the case of AKEL, the left-wing party, s/he can hardly find a strong connection with other European left parties, which followed a Eurosceptic agenda. Although one might see a populist connection between AKEL and other European left parties, such as Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain, there are critical determinants that differentiate AKEL. In substance, after the Turkish invasion of 1974, AKEL was not an outsider (Charalambous, 2018). Most importantly though, AKEL's stance has never undermined the EU establishment, especially after the island's accession to the Union. As opposed to the hard Euroscepticism of Syriza – which adopted a full anti-EU rhetoric and attacked the banks, the EU institutions and Germany (Balfour et al., 2019) – AKEL has not expressed hard Eurosceptic political views. Rather, AKEL should be seen as a "popular" or "demotic" party and not a populist party, since the people did not maintain "a 'universal' status in AKEL's discourse" (Venizelos, 2022: 809).

Of course, it is imperative to note that despite the affiliation between Greece and Cyprus and the ancient bonds between the two countries, there are significant differences in their political agendas. In Cyprus, the feeling of belonging to Hellenism and the bond with Greece coexists, for many years, with a developing Cypriot identity. Relevant to that is the pursuit of a definition of what makes the nation. As a result, "Greek Cypriot nationalism has been widely present in the political arena, institutionalised in educational, sports, and administrative practices" (Charalambous and Christoforou, 2018: 453). What is more, the Cyprus problem remains a prominent and critical issue in the politics of the island. The *de facto* division in Cyprus is an important factor which differentiates the politics of the island from the politics of any other member state (Ibid.). If a connection between AKEL and Syriza is hardly possible, then a connection with KKE, the *par excellence* communist party in Greece, is even less conceivable. KKE calls for an EU exit and a return to the drachma – Greece's previous currency (Pagoulatos, 2021). This position is definitely not the case for AKEL, which sees Cyprus' future within the EU.

Although there was initially some scepticism over the island's membership, as the European project was considered by AKEL members "bastions of capitalism and an

extension of NATO” (Clerides, 2008: 11) (and despite some occasional criticism of the EU), AKEL sees Cyprus’ position within the Union and envisages a solution to the Cyprus problem in conjunction to European values. During his speech for the 20th anniversary of the island’s accession to the EU, an AKEL MP asserted: “The accession of the Republic of Cyprus to the European Union constituted, without doubt, a great landmark in our modern history, which was achieved with the support of all political powers...” (Kafkalias, 2024). This pro-European attitude is also reflected in the party’s official position: “The Cyprus problem should be solved within the UN framework... the European principles and values” (AKEL, n.d.).

The importance of EU membership is highlighted by the other two traditional political powers on the island: the Democratic Rally and the Democratic Party (based on the history of the island and the results of previous elections, the Democratic Rally, AKEL and the Democratic Party constitute the three traditional political powers on the island). The Democratic Rally, in its party constitution, asserts that “the Democratic Rally seeks a free, peaceful and united Cyprus, which will be functioning based on the European principles and values” (DISY, 2023). In addition, during her speech for the 20th anniversary of the island’s accession to the EU, the president of the Democratic Rally, and president of the Cypriot House of Representatives (see Statement by the president of DISY; DISY President Annita Dimitrou (2024) too, said: “DISY, the par excellence European party, will continue to fight for a strong Cyprus within the EU, free and unified, for a better future and the best preconditions indeed: the strongest team! Because Europe is all of us”. On the same occasion, the president of the Democratic Party; Papadópoulou (2024) characterised the island’s accession to the European Union as “the greatest achievement of the country since the establishment of the Republic of Cyprus” and “a great historical event, the fruit of a long-term vision”.

Commenting on this weak presence of Euroscepticism on the island, Venizelos claims that “the failure of populism to take root in Cyprus, brings to the fore important theoretical insights relevant to the non-emergence of populism even under favourable conditions”. As opposed to the examples of Marine Le Pen in France, Geert Wilders in the Netherlands, Podemos in Spain, Syriza in Greece, and other examples in Europe, in his words, “Cyprus is the missing link in the chain of European populism” (Venizelos, 2022: 797, 798).

Despite some occasional instances of populism, the main party positions on the island remain pro-European. Euroscepticism has not become an attractive popular concept, as the local population feel European citizens. A prominent and natural reason is the fact that the Cypriots and the local political powers connect EU accession with the safety of the island. Euroscepticism does not align with this context, simply because it undermines the island’s safety. According to Kentas, “scepticism on EU’s impact on the Cyprus problem appears across the party system” (Kentas, 2021: 27). However he also states that, although scepticism is not necessarily a negative thing when the purpose is improvement of a current state, “Cypriots know for sure that there is no alternative to the EU in seeking the best possible future for their country” (Ibid: 28).

This feeling of safety derives from the EU project as a whole, since it is “a project of peace” (Demetriades, 2017: xv). In essence, for a divided island like Cyprus, located in one of the most turbulent regions in the world near Israel, Lebanon, Syria and of course Turkey, it is of critical importance to be part of this peace project. Indeed, Cyprus “had joined the European Union in order to safeguard its very own survival in a turbulent region”; let alone if the observer bears in mind that “nearly half of its territory [is] already occupied by Turkey”. The economic factor was another critical incentive, but to a very great extent, the benefit was “to safeguard its territorial integrity” (Demetriades, 2017: 108).

Two politicians who played a pivotal role during their presidencies for Cyprus’ European future are former presidents George Vassiliou (1988-1993) and Glafkos Clerides (1993-2003). Vassiliou submitted the application for accession to the Union in 1990, while Clerides, who succeeded him, participated in the negotiations (Clerides, 2008). Both believed in the European project and considered Cyprus’ European membership an important determinant for the safety and the development of the island. According to Clerides, “the idea that Cyprus should join the European Union was developed in Athens” (Clerides, 2008: 13). Theodoros Pangalos, then Foreign Minister of Greece, stated that the European Union would be a “political guarantee” for the island’s independence and sovereignty. At the same time, it would make Cyprus’ position within the international community stronger. A solution to the Cyprus problem could be formulated on the basis of the European framework and could contribute to a growing economy on the island (Ibidem.).

Vassiliou (2010) explains that the Cypriots and the local political parties envisaged the future of the island within the EU, because the political reasons of EU membership are of paramount importance. Cyprus is a small island in the Eastern Mediterranean which cannot remain isolated and detached from the political developments of the region. The feeling of belonging to the European Community gives the Cypriot a sense of “security”. The era when a country could be self-sufficient is gone, let alone for a small divided island. The common currency and the fact that European citizens can travel without their passports makes them feel part of a whole. Since Cyprus entered the European community, the Cypriot citizen became a European citizen with equal rights to any other European citizen (Vassiliou, 2010).

The power imbalance between the two guarantors, Greece and Turkey – and the latter’s consideration by the US as an indispensable ally, made it clear that a fair solution to the Cyprus problem could only come true with the involvement of a new “player”: the EU. In practice, Turkey’s refusal to recognise the Republic of Cyprus means that it objects to the recognition of an EU member state (Ibid.). In addition, the EU is not only a safe place for a divided Cyprus that experiences Turkish expansionism, but also a community that aims at a prosperous and peaceful future with growing economies. So, while in some member states Eurosceptic politicians see the EU and its institutions as a threat to their countries’ sovereignty, in Cyprus the EU membership ensures the island’s sovereignty. According to Vassiliou, “Cyprus is perhaps the only country in Europe, where you won’t see Eurosceptics” and there are political reasons for that: “The Greek Cypriots realised that they can find

safety and certainty for the future, only within the large family of the European peoples” (Vassiliou, 2010: 298).

Besides, the observer should also bear in mind that the expansion of the EU with new member states can result in further benefits, including: peacekeeping in Europe and perhaps in the whole world; reforms which can contribute to the peaceful coexistence of people; economic developments; security and safety; and critical role for the EU in the political developments worldwide. Surely, peace and stability constitute by far the most important aspects of the EU project (Vassiliou, 2019/a). Babanassis (2019) too notes that the most important achievement of the EU is the fact that it ensures the existence of peace and stability, through the collaboration of the member states. As regards the expansion of the EU, it improved the geopolitical and geoeconomic position of the Union in world politics (Babanassis, 2019).

Major political parties in Cyprus support EU membership, because they realise its political value and importance (Vassiliou, 2019/a). The future of Cyprus cannot be seen outside the European community, since, as EU citizens, the Cypriots can feel safe. In addition, the EU can play a fundamental role in the reunification of the island (Vassiliou, 2019/b). Although the Annan Plan in 2004 was rejected by the majority of the Greek Cypriot community who expressed some reasonable concerns about its basic provisions, a solution based on a bizonal-bicommunal federation is feasible and can be achieved within the European framework. Since the political culture of the island embodies the European values and today Cyprus enjoys the benefits of EU membership, then future progress is likely to reflect these values.

According to Heywood, political culture “in its broadest sense, is the way of life of a people” and “the ‘pattern of orientations’ to political objects such as parties, government, and the constitution, expressed in beliefs, symbols and values” (Heywood, 2019: 352). In Cyprus, in particular after the island’s accession to the EU, the European mentality found institutional expression through the structures of the EU itself and became a norm in political life. As an EU member state, Cyprus adopted a pro-European direction that affected local politics and established a pro-EU political sentiment. As such, the EU is in fact a necessity for the safety of the island and the vehicle for a viable solution to the island’s national problem.

## Conclusion

Euroscepticism emerged as criticism of the EU and developed into an overt attack against its policies and institutions in various member states. However, none of these countries, where Euroscepticism has been personified by charismatic leaders, faces the political challenges of Cyprus. This explains why the local political parties are very mindful of their language and avoid phrasing that could damage the relationship with the EU. Consequently, they stress the importance of EU membership and how vital it is for the future of the island. The call for an EU exit, as seen in the UK and other countries, can hardly gain validity and



become a popular and prevailing political sentiment in Cyprus. In that respect, Cyprus remains “safe” from the threat of Euroscepticism.

Without asserting that Euroscepticism has not affected Cyprus at all, the truth is that the national problem, interwoven with the feeling of security that the EU provides, keeps Euroscepticism at a very minimum level. Consequently, if the observer was meant to identify the reasons why Euroscepticism has never become a widely accepted political concept or political culture on the island, then s/he also needs to examine the history of the island, which makes Cyprus a one-of-a-kind case in the European family.

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