



Yiannos Katsourides und Leandros Savvides

The Profiteers of Fear?

Right-wing Populism and the COVID-19 Crisis
in Europe
Cyprus

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About this publication

Pandemic politics in Cyprus have not had a decisive impact on party competition, at least yet. When the elections took place in May 2021 harsh restrictions (lock-downs) were lifted and the public opinion viewed rather favourably the measures adopted by the government. No party expressed principled opposition to these measures; criticism targeted mostly some inconsistencies in their application. Unlike other far-right parties in Europe, the Greek Cypriot far-right party, the National Popular Front (ELAM), avoided stating a clear position whether they do accept the scientific consensus or side with conspiracy theories. Instead, ELAM focused on criticizing the policies of the government and emphasized individual liberties/rights arguing against mandatory vaccination. Their electoral share in the elections increased, compared to the previous elections, but this was rather related to their overall populist and anti-systemic appeal than pandemic politics alone.

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The Profiteers of Fear?

Right-wing Populism and the COVID-19 Crisis in Europe Cyprus

Born initially as a subsidiary party of Golden Dawn (GD) in Cyprus, ELAM not only maintained very close links with GD, but grew within and was nurtured by the Greek party to make its first steps.¹ The initial approach included an overtly racist and authoritarian rhetoric, as well as anti-communist bias and street activism, just like GD. Following GD's conviction as a criminal organization in October 2020, ELAM quickly distanced itself from its original womb,² and has come further into the mainstream of the political spectrum in Cyprus. ELAM's evolution, since, charts a path from the initial movement type of political behaviour to its maturity into a radical right populist party and an electorally successful one.

This is not unrelated to the development of Cypriot politics in recent years, which is now more receptive to populism than ever, largely due to the repercussions of the economic crisis and the elevation of corruption high on the political agenda. Following the (already cult) series on the Cyprus papers by Al Jazeera, which exposed the Cypriot citizenship investment programme as a corruption pool, ELAM portrayed itself as the only party that did not participate in the corruption scandals, something that all other systemic parties cannot claim, including its fierce critic, the left-wing AKEL.³ This facilitated ELAM's rebranding into a radical right populist party, whilst maintaining the core policies that placed it into the parliament in the first place. Now, the party has a plethora of narrative and policy paths it can exploit for further development, with immigration still standing out as a privilege issue. The Cyprus problem and the tensions in

the Eastern Mediterranean region have further favoured the political growth of ELAM. The pandemic proved yet another issue the party could exploit for this mutation with considerable (electoral) success.

A SECULAR(ISH), POPULIST APPROACH TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

ELAM did not question the existence of the pandemic but carefully avoided a clear stance on the issue of vaccination. There is no official data to support the association of conspiracy ideas to vaccination and 'coronavirus is a hoax' ideas to ELAM. The party hierarchy, including the party president, Christos Christou (himself a medical professional), has not been vaccinated till this day, questioning the effectiveness of the vaccines, but they did not argue against vaccination either.⁴ Instead, they took an approach of individual liberties/rights arguing against mandatory vaccination, assigning the latter as 'a practice of dictatorial regimes and against the concept of freedom of will of each individual ... The people should have a choice on how best to protect their health'.⁵

Looking at the rest of the party politics, with their insistence on collective responses, this is a contradiction. However, it resonates with part of their audience which consists of a religious as well as nationalist crowd prone to conspiracy theories, similar to other like-minded parties in Europe that typically single out 'minorities' of the population as responsible for social problems. Thus, we can explain its ambiguous response and the participation of party cadres and voters in rallies against compulsory vaccination. Moreover, and although not characterizing the measures of the government as authoritarian, ELAM demanded that they be passed through the parliament, as ELAM see the government using its powers in an abusive manner. A paradox perhaps, but

- 1 Luciano Lyritsas (2021 June 20), 'Cyprus: Political dealings with the far right', DW.com. Available at <https://www.dw.com/el/%CE%BA%CF%8D%CF%80%CF%81%CE%BF%CF%82-%CF%80%CE%BF%CE%BB%CE%B9%CF%84%CE%B9%CE%BA%CE%AD%CF%82-%CE%B4%CE%BF%CF%83%CE%BF%CE%BB%CE%B7%CF%88%CE%AF%CE%B5%CF%82-%CE%BC%CE%B5-%CF%84%CE%B7%CE%BD-%CE%AC%CE%BA%CF%81%CE%B1-%CE%B4%CE%B5%CE%BE%CE%B9%CE%AC/a-57965153>, accessed 13 July 2021.
- 2 Alphanews.live. (2021 June 23), 'Ο Χρίστου εξηγεί: Γιατί το ΕΛΑΜ διέκοψε τις σχέσεις με την Χρυσή Αυγή' (BINTEO) [Christou explains: Why ELAM severed ties with Golden Dawn], Alphanews.live. Available at <https://www.alphanews.live/politics/o-xristoy-exigei-giati-ELAM-diekopse-tis-sheseis-me-tin-hrysi-aygi-binteo>, accessed 13 July 2021.
- 3 ELAM CY (2021 April 5), 'Σ. Ιωάννου: "Η Ιστορία του ΑΚΕΛ είναι ταυτισμένη με σκάνδαλα και διαφθορά"', ELAMcy.com. Available at <https://ELAMcy.com/s-ioannou-i-istoria-tou-akel-einai-taftismeni-me-skandala-kai-diafthora/>, accessed 22 August 2021.

- 4 Kathimerini (2021 May 15), 'Χρίστου: Δεν εμβολιάστηκα. Δεν είμαι βέβαιος για τις συνέπειες των εμβολίων' ['Christou: I was not vaccinated, I am not sure about the consequences of the vaccines'], Kathimerini.com. Available at <https://www.kathimerini.com.cy/gr/politiki/xristoy-den-emboliastika-den-eimai-bebaios-gia-tis-synepeies-ton-embolion>, accessed 22 August 2021.
- 5 ELAM CY (2020 June 28), 'Το ΕΛΑΜ τάσσεται ενάντια στον υποχρεωτικό εμβολιασμό' ['ELAM opposes mandatory vaccines'], ELAMcy.com. Available at <https://elamcy.com/to-elam-tassetai-enantia-ston-yprochreotiko-emboliasmo/>, accessed 22 August 2021

evident of its populist turn, ELAM has called the present state of the RoC a police state, calling for a return to democracy.⁶

The ELAM case during the pandemic is therefore elusive at best. Unlike other far-right parties, they avoided stating a clear position whether they do accept the scientific consensus or side with conspiracy theories. Instead, ELAM has focused on criticizing the policies of the government. In this regard, ELAM branded the policies of the government as divisive, polarizing the population between the vaccinated and the unvaccinated,⁷ ensuring exacerbation of the problem rather than finding a solution. While acknowledging the severity of the health crisis, they criticized the first lockdown decision as wrong and harmful for the economy;⁸ they called for the immediate closure of all crossing-points to the Turkish controlled area to protect the people since the government of the RoC does not exercise any control over the entrance points in the North;⁹ they were the only party that voted against legislation that provided high penalties for those who violated the measures;¹⁰ they emphasized the unpreparedness of the government;¹¹ they opposed property sales of defaulting debtors by the banks putting forth legislation to extend the grace period due to the pandemic effect;¹² they criticized the government measures as privileging only the few and asked for a more popular response;¹³

etc. When the government decided to put an end to the free rapid tests for those who did not want to be vaccinated, they opposed and argued that all who pay for the National Health Care System should be allowed to receive the benefits of it.¹⁴

PANDEMIC VIOLENCE AND THE POSITION OF ELAM

As regards the violence on the part of either anti-vaxxers' or Covid-19 deniers' conspiracy theories, ELAM has officially not taken part in this. There is no evidence of the party officially rallying in such demonstrations. When one of these turned violent, with part of the crowd attacking the media group Dias, ELAM voiced another ambiguous response. It acknowledged the initially peaceful and successful character of the demonstration and blamed both the measures taken by the government as divisive and also disapproved 'everything that happened last night' as not helpful.¹⁵

'CYPRUS FIRST' – EVOLUTION TO AN AMALGAM OF TRUMP, SALVINI AND LE PEN POLITICS

The closing message of ELAM's parliamentary campaign showed that the evolution from the political margin towards mainstream politics is not happenstance, but a political strategy. Denoting the Trump political brand 'America first', ELAM tries to diffuse the slogan 'Cyprus first' into the Cypriot society.¹⁶ Seen as starting not from a position of xenophobia but from a more nuanced positive message of loving one's own community more than anything, the slogan perverts and masquerades far-right politics with the former.¹⁷ In this context, the demonstrations against migrants (e.g., in Chloraka, Paphos) are not promoted as xenophobic events against migrants and refugees as such, but rather motivated from a concern for the local communities who are struggling to make ends meet against government indifference

6 ELAM CY (2021 July 29), 'Το ΕΛΑΜ προειδοποιεί για τα αυριανά υγειονομικά μέτρα!' ['ELAM warns about tomorrow's health measures!'], ELAMcy.com. Available at <https://ELAMcy.com/to-ELAM-proeidopoiel-gia-ta-avriana-ygeionomika-metra/>, accessed 22 August 2021.

7 ELAM CY (2021 August 3), 'Τα καταχρηστικά μέτρα της Κυβέρνησης κατάφεραν να διχάσουν τον λαό!' ['The abusive measures of the Government managed to divide the people!'], ELAMcy.com. Available at <https://elamcy.com/ta-katachristika-metra-tis-kyvernisis-kataferan-na-dichasoun-ton-laou/>, accessed 22 August 2021.

8 Polys Anogyriatis (2020 November 23), 'Ο κόσμος έκανε το καθήκον του... Η Κυβέρνηση φαίνεται πως ΟΧΙ!' ['The people did their job; The Government seems NOT!'], ELAMcy.com. Available at <https://elamcy.com/o-kosmos-ekane-to-kathikon-tou-i-kyvernisi-fainetai-pos-ochi/>, accessed 12 July 2021.

9 ELAM CY (2020 January 31), 'Υψιστη προτεραιότητα η υγεία του λαού – Κλείστε τα οδοφράγματα!' [The highest priority is the health of the people - Close the roadblocks, ELAMcy.com. Available at <https://elamcy.com/ypsisti-proteraiotita-i-ygeia-tou-laou-kleiste-ta-odofragmata/>, accessed 12 July 2021.

10 ELAM CY (2020 August 11) 'Με εξαντλητικά πρόστιμα γονατούν την κοινωνία – Μόνο το ΕΛΑΜ τάχθηκε ξεκάθαρα κατά' ['They bring society to its knees with exhausting fines – Only ELAM clearly stood against'], ELAMcy.com. Available at <https://elamcy.com/me-eksantlitika-prostima-gonatoun-tin-koinonia-mono-to-elam-tachthike-ksekathara-kata/>, accessed 12 July 2021.

11 Marios Vassileos (2020 May 18), 'Απροετοίμαστη η Κυπριακή Οικονομία' ['The Cypriot economy is unprepared'], ELAMcy.com. Available at <https://elamcy.com/aproetoimasti-i-kypriaki-oikonomia-tou-mariou-vasileiou/>, accessed 12 July 2021.

12 ELAM CY (2020 August 24), 'ΟΧΙ στις ΕΚΠΟΙΗΣΕΙΣ – Πρόταση Νόμου από το ΕΛΑΜ' ['NO to SELLINGS - Proposal of a Law by ELAM'], ELAMcy.com. Available at <https://elamcy.com/ochi-stis-ekpoiiseis-protasi-nomou-apo-to-elam/>, accessed 13 July 2021.

13 ELAM CY (2020 March 27), 'Μέτρα για ΟΛΟΥΣ και ΟΧΙ για ΛΙΓΟΥΣ – Το ΕΛΑΜ απαιτεί φιλολαϊκή πολιτική απέναντι στον κορωνοϊό' ['Measures for ALL and NOT for FEW – ELAM demands pro-people policy towards the coronavirus'], ELAMcy.com. Available at <https://elamcy.com/metra-gia-olous-kai-ochi-gia-ligous-to-elam-apaitei-filolaiki-politiki-apananti-ston-koronoio/>, accessed 13 July 2021.

14 ELAM CY (2021 August 5), 'Ο λαός πληρώνει ΓΕΣΥ – Τα τέστ ταχείας διάγνωσης να είναι ΔΩΡΕΑΝ' ['People pay GESY – Rapid diagnostic tests to be FREE'], ELAMcy.com. Available at <https://ELAMcy.com/o-laos-plironei-gesy-ta-test-tacheias-diagnosis-na-einai-dorean/> accessed 22 August 2021.

15 ELAM CY (2021 July 19), 'Το ΕΛΑΜ καταδικάζει τα επεισόδια στο ΣΙΓΜΑ – Επιβάλλεται η ενότητα. ΟΧΙ η διχόνοια' ['ELAM condemns the episodes in SIGMA - Unity is required, NOT discord'], ELAMcy.com. Available at <https://ELAMcy.com/to-ELAM-katadikazei-ta-epeisodia-sto-sigma-epivalletai-i-enotita-ochi-i-dichonoia/>, accessed 22 August 2021.

16 ELAM CY (2021 May 28), 'Τελικό μήνυμα από τον Πρόεδρο του ΕΛΑΜ για τις Βουλευτικές – Πρώτα η Κύπρος' ['Final message from the President of ELAM for the Parliamentary – First Cyprus'] ELAMcy.com. Available at <https://ELAMcy.com/teliko-minyma-apo-ton-proedro-tou-ELAM-gia-tis-vouleftikes-protai-kypros/>, accessed 22 August 2021.

17 ELAM CY (2021 March 21), 'Είναι ρατσισμός να αγωνιζέσαι για τη σωτηρία της Πατρίδας σου;' ['Is it racism to fight for the salvation of your homeland?'], ELAMcy.com. Available at <https://ELAMcy.com/einai-ratsismos-na-agonizesai-gia-ti-sotiria-tis-patridas-sou/>, accessed 12 July 2021.

and lack of care.¹⁸ In this way, ELAM managed to capitalize and even further incite on the increasing tensions between the local communities which try to meet ends.

This new standing is also reflected in the party's positions in the economy, which they have developed further towards the mainstream, maintaining at the same time a worker(ish) slang and profile on many occasions; for example, it has called for a stop to evicting people from their houses when they cannot pay their loans.¹⁹ The party is in favour of a market economy, although a regulated one, much closer to what someone can expect from a left-of-centre party. It supports foreign direct investment, and it is not by default inimical to a citizenship by investment programme, rather to the version articulated in Cyprus the last decade.²⁰

USING INDIVIDUAL LIBERTIES AS IT CALLS FOR RESTRICTIONS ON IMMIGRATION

ELAM extended its rhetoric of individual liberty against mandatory vaccination of any sort in other policy areas too. A contradiction in terms, ELAM used individual and human rights narratives to argue against immigrants' rights. Despite adopting a kind of libertarian approach on the issue of health, as regards the Cypriot population, ELAM routinely calls for a stricter approach on immigration, regularly connecting migrants/asylum seekers/refugees to criminal activities and a lost feeling of security,²¹ similar to a Trump style of politics.

“THE WAR IS OVER”, SEND THEM BACK!

Even within the blazing pandemic, ELAM has regularly called for a more restrictive immigration policy.²² As many analysts

and columnists claim, the party not only managed to pass the spirit of its attitude to the government, but, in fact, ELAM is one of the pillars of immigration policy in Cyprus. The party line of ascribing to asylum seekers connections with ISIS and other criminal and terrorist organizations were not only answered by government officials and members of the ruling party DISY, but even amplified on many occasions.²³ Many believe that there has been an increasing elevated approach to an under the table collaboration between ELAM and the ruling party which dates back a couple of years, but has become more evident this year.²⁴ ELAM's stance on migration is so hard-lined that the party even considers the war in Syria to be over, thereby calling the government to deny or even evoke refugee status to the largest group that usually is granted asylum in Cyprus.²⁵

ANTI-CORRUPTION POLITICS AS A CATALYST FOR ELECTORAL SUCCESS

As the public debate on government corruption soared, especially touching upon the practices of President Anastasiades, most political parties sought to use an anti-corruption stance as a spearhead of their electoral campaigns. ELAM used its inexperienced presence in parliamentary politics as self-evident proof of not being within the system of corruption.²⁶ Using the issue of corruption from a position of higher moral ground than other political opponents, and capitalizing on the normalization of far-right rhetoric and policies on a number of issues, ELAM was the only party to show significant gains in the recent elections, rising from 3.71% and 13,041 votes in 2016 to 6.78% and 24,255 votes in 2021, thus becoming a regulator party in the highly fragmented political scene of Cyprus.²⁷

- 18** ELAM CY (2020 June 6), 'Δυναμική παρουσία του ΕΛΑΜ στα γκέτο της Χλώρακας – ΟΧΙ στην εγκληματικότητα των παράνομων μεταναστών' ['Dynamic presence of ELAM in the ghettos of Chloraka – NO to the crime of illegal immigrants'], ELAMcy.com. Available at <https://ELAMcy.com/dynamiki-parousia-tou-ELAM-sti-chloraka-ochi-stin-egklimatikotita-ton-paranomomon-metanaston/>, accessed 12 July 2021.
- 19** ELAM CY (2021 July 27), 'Το ΕΛΑΜ και πάλι στάθηκε ΕΝΑΝΤΙΑ στις ΕΚΠΟΙΗΣΕΙΣ' ['ELAM again stood AGAINST THE POPULATIONS'], ELAMcy.com. Available at <https://ELAMcy.com/to-ELAM-kai-pali-stathike-enantia-stis-ekpoiseis/>, accessed 12 July 2021.
- 20** In Business News (2021 May 22), 'Χ. Χρίστου: Η πρότασή μας για μια υγιή οικονομική ανάπτυξη!' ['Ch. Christou: Our proposal for a healthy economic growth'], InBusiness News.com, Available at <https://inbusinessnews.reporter.com.cy/financials/cyprus/article/277644/ch-christoy-i-protasi-mas-ga-mia-ygi-oikonomiki-anaptyxi>, accessed 13 July 2021.
- 21** ELAM CY (2020 November 11), 'Τρομοκράτες και στην Κύπρο – Το ΕΛΑΜ απαιτεί αυστηρή μεταναστευτική πολιτική' ['Terrorists in Cyprus as well – ELAM demands a strict immigration policy'], ELAMcy.com. Available at <https://ELAMcy.com/tromokrates-kai-stin-kypro-to-ELAM-apaitei-afstiri-metanastefiki-politiki/>, accessed 12 July 2021.
- 22** ELAM CY (2020 May 27), 'Το ΕΛΑΜ δεν ζητάει αλλά ΑΠΑΙΤΕΙ μεταναστευτική πολιτική εδώ και τώρα!' ['ELAM does not ask but REQUIRES immigration policy here and now!'], ELAMcy.com. Available at <https://ELAMcy.com/to-ELAM-den-zitaei-alla-apaitei-metanastefiki-politiki-edo-kai-tora/>, accessed 12 July 2021.

- 23** Kathimerini (2020 May 27), 'Κ. Χατζηγιάννη: Αιτητές ασύλου στη Χλώρακα φαίνεται να διατηρούν δεσμούς με ISIS', ['K. Hadjiyianni: Asylum seekers in Chloraka seem to maintain ties with ISIS'], Kathimerini.com.cy. Available at <https://www.kathimerini.com.cy/gr/politiki/k-xatzigianni-aitites-asyloy-sti-qlwraka-fainetai-na-diatiroyn-desmoys-me-isis>, accessed 12 July 2021.
- 24** Brief (2020 December 12), 'Έκπληξη από ΕΛΑΜ - Λέει ΝΑΙ στον Προϋπολογισμό' [Surprise from ELAM – Says yes to the budget'], Brief.com.cy. Available at <https://www.brief.com.cy/oikonomia/kypros/ekplixi-apo-ELAM-leei-nai-ston-proypologismo>, accessed 13 July 2021.
- 25** ELAM CY (2021 January 4), 'Ο πόλεμος στην Συρία έχει λήξει – Αναθεώρηση και απέλαση των διήθεν προσφύγων από την Κύπρο' ['The war in Syria is over: Review and deportation of the so-called refugees in Cyprus'], ELAMcy.com. Available at <https://ELAMcy.com/o-polemos-stin-syria-echei-liksei-anatheorisi-kai-apelasi-ton-dithen-prosfygon-apo-tin-kypro/>, accessed 12 July 2021.
- 26** ELAM CY (2021 February 12), 'Χ. Χρίστου: «Η διαφθορά πηγάζει μέσα από την κομματοκρατία»' ['Ch. Christou: "Corruption springs from partisanship"'], ELAMcy.com. Available at <https://ELAMcy.com/ch-christou-i-diafthora-pigazei-mesa-apo-tin-kommatokratia/>, accessed 12 July 2021.
- 27** Eleftheria Paizanou (2021 May 31), '«Νικήτρις» των εκλογών το ΕΛΑΜ' ['"Winner" of the elections is ELAM'], Philnews.com. Available at <https://www.philnews.com/eidiseis/politiki/article/1203449/-nikitis-ton-eklogon-to-ELAM>, accessed 12 July 2021.

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Right-wing populism and the COVID-19 crisis

In many countries the COVID-19 crisis had initially led to increased trust in government. The restrictions to personal freedoms, curfews, restrictions on social contacts, the closure of large segments of the economy as well as the widening of executive powers in many countries was largely accepted and supported by the public. However, frustration and distrust of government have been increasing the longer the restrictions have been in place. Some countries, such as Germany, witnessed large demonstrations against the counter measures. Moreover, the wide dissemination of fake news and conspiracy theories are influencing the public debate on how to handle the pandemic.

Reports from Sweden, Finland, Italy, France, Spain, Greece, Romania, Cyprus and Germany – all countries with large or growing right-wing populist movements and parties explore the question, if right-wing populism in Europe has been able to benefit from the Corona-crisis. A synopsis interprets and classifies the developments in the individual countries in a comparative perspective.

Further information on the project can be found here:

fes.de/c19rex