

**THE POLITICAL SYSTEM OF CYPRUS AT
THE THRESHOLD OF THE EUROPEAN UNION:
PATTERNS OF CONTINUITY, CHANGE
AND ADAPTATION**

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Abstract

While the impact of Cyprus's EU membership on national policies constitutes a core concern in the context of pre- and post-accession strategies, the implications of European integration on the country's political system has not attracted similar attention. During the last decade, a great number of far-reaching developments occurred in Cypriot governance and public policy-making and some innovative features were introduced in domestic politics. This study first examines the concept of Europeanisation as a factor of change in comparison with other endogenous and exogenous pressures on Cyprus's political system. It then analyses selected changes and reforms undergone in connection with Cyprus's application for membership of the European Union. Empirical evidence suggests that the patterns of domestic politics combine continuity, change and adaptation. This study contributes to the growing literature concerned with the impact of European integration on domestic politics.

Introduction

As the Greek philosopher Heracleitos said "panta rei" (everything changes). In the same way, political systems are also subject to change. The EU membership perspective seems to act as a catalyst for change in nearly all walks of life which in one way or another fall within the scope of the *acquis communautaire*, and in an indirect way even beyond. The change may be designed and politically highly salient, or it may be gradual and incremental, but in the medium and long run noticeable and significant. In this respect, empirical evidence from the Cypriot case indicates that within the context of Europeanisation, those two methods for change strategies are not mutually exclusive. They rather seem to be the two components of a double track strategy.

Two strands of theories of institutional change may provide us with useful frameworks of analysis (Pierson 1996). Theories of intentional institutional change are particularly relevant for explaining reforms in the context of accession negotiations, given the fact that the changes brought about are mainly based on goal-oriented adaptation strategies. Theories seeking to account for institutional change in terms of path dependency may be equally important to shed light both on how change occurs and how it is rooted in a given political system incrementally.

European integration has emerged as a major and constant source of change for the political system not only of Member States but of accession countries as well. This stems from the primary obligation of EU membership to comply with the *acquis communautaire*. For member states it is an incremental ongoing process. For accession countries this demands a considerable legislative, economic, financial, administrative and last but not least societal effort well before membership becomes reality¹.

¹See: SWIERKOCKI, J. (2001) (ed) «Accession Negotiations - Selected Results, Interim Report», Lodz: European Institute, Preston, Chr. (1997) "Enlargement and Integration in the European" Union, London: Routledge.

More precisely accession countries have to apply 80,000 pages of EU law, adapt the bureaucratic and administrative systems to the EU context as well as raise their efficiencies, strengthen their judicial systems, tighten security at the external borders and adopt many other change strategies. A detailed account and initial evidence for the breadth and depth of all adaptation reforms undertaken by every applicant/accession country can be provided by the European Commission's regular country reports on the progress towards accession².

The impact of European polity and policies on accession countries is impressive. Accession countries have to make an important legislative effort in order to adopt the *acquis communautaire*, and introduce the necessary administrative changes for the relevant implementation and monitoring mechanisms. They have to comply with the political criteria (democracy, rule of law, human rights, protection of minorities). They have to fulfill the economic criteria (a functioning market economy and the capacity to cope with competitive pressures and market forces within the Union) both defined by the 1993 Copenhagen European Council. They have to undertake an important effort of EU political socialization of their citizens who automatically acquire the European citizenship. It is no easy task for a small country (Soetendorp, H. and Hanf, K.: 1998) with limited human and financial resources, to cope with the complex accession negotiations and introduce successfully a series of important reforms. This study constitutes an initial attempt to explore and highlight the gradual yet profound developments in the adaptation of Cyprus's political system³ and contribute to the growing literature concerned with the impact of European integration on domestic politics.

² The European Commission has presented the above-mentioned regular reports to the Council on the basis of a decision taken at the Luxembourg European Council: "From the end of 1998, the Commission will make Regular Reports to the Council, ... reviewing the progress ... towards accession in the light of the Copenhagen criteria, in particular the rate at which it is adapting to the Union *acquis*..." .

³ The impact of Europeanisation on the Cyprus political problem does not fall within the scope of this study.

Europeanisation as a factor for change

Literature on Europeanisation has burgeoned. The concept has become increasingly employed to describe a process of transformation both at the EU level and at the national level. Ladrech (1994) offers an interesting working definition: “Europeanisation is an incremental process reorienting the direction and shape of politics to the degree that EC political and economic dynamics become part of the organisational logic of national politics and policy-making”. Olsen (2002), in an interesting and substantive article entitled “The Many Faces of Europeanization”, analyses the five uses of “Europeanisation”⁴ and points out that “the research challenge is not primarily one of inventing definitions” but one of “model-building” the dynamics of change in ways that make the simplifying assumptions behind various definitions accessible to empirical test” (Olsen 2002:944).

Over the last ten years, the EU has undoubtedly proven to be the single most important driving force for Cyprus’s socio-political, economic and institutional modernisation; hundreds of new laws have been adopted, numerous new institutions have been set up and a great number of structures in the public and private field have been adapted to the country’s accession perspective. Although Goetz (2001), concludes that the literature “casts some doubt over the explanatory power of “European integration” as a major force driving domestic executive change”, this seems not to be the case of Cyprus. If what Goetz says constitutes a rule, then Cyprus is the exception that confirms the rule!

This is the very first study on the impact of European integration on the political system of Cyprus. It is not comprehensive in scope, but rather limited to selected aspects at various levels. Empirical evidence from other European countries indicates quite contradictory patterns with respect to scope and direction of change. In some cases, the trend is reported to be more towards

⁴ Changes in external boundaries, Developing institutions at the European level, Central penetration of national system of governance, Exporting forms of political organization, A political unification project.

convergence in style and structures (Schneider 2001) and in others to have a rather differential impact (Caporaso, Cowels and Risse 2001). According to Knill's work on the Europeanisation of national administrations, the scope of domestic adaptation is constrained by the macro-institutional context of national administrative traditions; notwithstanding the fact that Europeanisation may sometimes imply sectoral revolutions at the domestic level (Knill 2001: 227).

Cole and Drake (2000) identified four uses of Europeanisation in domestic politics. Europeanisation can be considered: as *an independent variable* and demonstrate that the EU has produced policy change in specific policy sectors; *as a form of emulative policy transfer* whereby Member States are influenced by strong national models; *as smokescreen for domestic political strategies*, generally for difficult domestic reforms; and *as an imaginary constraint*.

The spectrum of change covers almost all walks of administrative and political life; from constitutional and other legal amendments to the adaptation of policy and decision-making processes; from administrative adaptations to cultural shifts; from political parties priorities and programmes to the empowerment, through networking, of non-governmental organisations (NGOs). It is difficult, however, to disentangle the impact of European integration from other endogenous or exogenous causes of change such as economic globalisation, or national agendas for reform.

The uniqueness of the European polity is one of the oldest *clichés* in academic writing pertaining to the phenomenon of European integration. It may be worthwhile to refer to it in this study. Institutional integration in the EU is characterised by the creation of a set of common institutions and the enmeshing of national and European levels of governance. In addition, the level of institutionalisation achieved in the EU is one of its salient defining features. Although it has not reached the level of density and complexity of institutionalisation in the nation-state, it is far stronger than that achieved in any other efforts of regional integration or in many international organisations. Given the

symbiotic relationship between the European core and its constituent members, it is obvious that the adaptation pressure is a two-way process, even in the case of accession countries.

“Europeanisation” deals with domestic conditions affecting the outcome of supranational institution-building and policy-making on the one hand and the impact of supranational policies, politics and polity at the national level, on the other. Early research on Europeanisation focused on the supranational level. It is only in the mid-1990s that it began to focus more systematically on the domestic impact of the European integration process [Andersen and Eliassen (1993); Mény, Muller and Quermonne: (1996); Schmidt (1996); Kohler-Koch and others (1998); Radaelli (2000); Héritier et al. (2001); Caporaso, Cowles and Risse (2001); South European Society and Politics (2003, No 1, Vol. 9)]. Notwithstanding a growing literature on the domestic impact of European integration, we are still confronted with rather limited and contradictory empirical and theoretical evidence. This study based on empirical analysis intends to shed more detailed light on the impact of European integration on the political system of an accession country, that of Cyprus. Within that analytical framework, this study examines the case of the political system and attempts to highlight the gradual yet profound developments.

Patterns of continuity, change and adaptation

One key role of political systems is to provide stability and continuity. The evolving system of governance in the EU challenges and transforms the nation state, the political culture and identity in the Member States. An ever growing literature on Europeanisation reveals that there is agreement over the fact that European integration has called into question many features associated with the traditional patterns of domestic politics and policies (Ladrech 1994, Cole 1998, Knill 2001).

As mentioned above, while the impact of Cyprus’s prospective EU membership on national policies has been a constant core concern in the context of pre- and post-accession strategies, the implications of European integration on the country’s political system has not

attracted similar attention. This does not mean that the impact is less important. It might suggest that the impact is less visible. In addition, the large-scale *adaptation pressure* on domestic polity, politics and policies allow for distinction among three levels of influence (low, moderate and high) according to the area and intensity of the EU *acquis* in question (Knill 2001: 41). In short, the domestic ramifications of European politics and policies depend upon the institutional compatibility of European policy requirements and relevant national structures, processes and cultures.

For analytical purposes we can differentiate between various levels where Europeanisation occurs [(Bulmer, S. and Buch, M. 2001), Bomberg, E. and Peterson, J.: 2000)] and might be useful to analyse for the purpose of this study:

- Policies: e.g. agriculture, competition, environment, employment, consumer protection, etc;
- Politics: e.g. political parties and interest groups;
- Polity: e.g. institutions;
- Society: e.g. identity, culture, citizenship.

The policies level

This constitutes the most prominent domain where change is visible. And it is so for a very simple reason; change is not the by-product but the core product of the accession negotiations process. Changes brought about in the context of Europeanisation are mainly based on goal-oriented strategies. It is the official objective of this titanic effort. The results need to be made visible both at the EU and at the national level.

As a matter of fact, change varies in scope according to the policy area in question and the relevant adaptation pressure exerted on the national political system. The breadth and depth of change depends on one hand on the type, scope and budget envelope of the community policy and, on the other on constraints pertaining to domestic actors' strategies, interests and priorities. A very good example can be drawn from the field of *sectoral policies*. The

country's agricultural and consumer protection policies have both undergone substantive reform. The intensity of the *acquis* is very high for the former and quite low for the latter. The structures and processes of the national policy-making are well developed and organised in the first case and rather loose in the second case.

In the case of agriculture, the reform spectrum has been wide in scope and sophisticated in techniques and processes. Thus, important law harmonisation efforts, administrative adaptation initiatives, both at the level of structures and processes e.g. monitoring mechanisms, set-up of new institutions, have been introduced. The *adaptation pressures* in this field as well as the resistance to change have been high throughout the process. The former can be explained by the financial importance of this policy and the latter by the existence of long-standing organised pressure groups seeking to preserve their *acquis*. The intensity of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) is high. The CAP is important both in terms of the bulk of legislation and necessary administrative structures and in terms of financial implications. If we examine the various stages of the agricultural policy harmonisation process in the light of the typology of the uses of Europeanisation [Cole and Drake (2000)], we observe that the EU has indeed produced a policy change. Thus, in this case, Europeanisation can certainly be considered as *an independent variable*. This is the case if we take the process as a whole, and also at the initial and final stage of the harmonisation process. In the intermediary stages, during difficult negotiations both at the EU and at national level, we can occasionally observe the uses of Europeanisation *as smokescreen for domestic political strategies*, and *as an imaginary constraint*.

In the case of consumer protection the change is equally impressive, nay revolutionary. From an embryonic and low profile policy the country elaborated an important legal framework, quite early in the accession negotiations. Although mainly limited to legislative adaptation, both the quantitative and the qualitative efforts are important. They provide Cypriot citizens with much higher protection than ever before, though this protection is weakened by the fact that no significant implementation and monitoring mechanisms have been introduced. This latter

deficiency may be attributed to two main factors: the low *adaptation pressure*, that can be explained to some extent, by the “low financial interest” of this policy that would lead the country to adequately adapt its structures and processes on one hand, and by the absence of powerful pressure groups in civil society on the other. Therefore, this situation led the national actors to adopt a minimalist approach and thus, keep the harmonisation effort at the strictly necessary level. In this way, they could present a good harmonisation record to the EU and to citizens and at the same time carefully avoid “unnecessary political risk and/or political cost”. As to the use of Europeanisation, it contrasts with the ones observed in the previous case and it was limited to that of *independent variable* throughout the harmonisation process.

In the case of *functional policies* of the EU, such as the regional and social policy, we can observe a similar pattern, though of a lower profile. The existence of long-standing official discussion *fora* and communication channels played a significant role in keeping the discourse on the negotiating table. In this case we did not witness impressive demonstrations like the ones organised by the farmers’ organisations.

The politics level

The process of Europeanization has presented a number of challenges to political parties and affected them in both subtle and explicit ways (Agapiou-Josephides 2003). Ladrech (2001:8) identified five areas of parties’ activities influenced by Europeanization: *policy/programmatic content, organizational structures, patterns of party competition, party-government relations and relations beyond the national party system*. The results of our research indicate that party adaptation to this new environment, be it policy change, organisational change and patterns of party competition has been slow, incremental but nevertheless in the medium and long run significant. The slowest process is to be observed in the case of *patterns of party competition* and *party - government relations*. The most impressive are noted in *policy/programmatic content, organisational structures, and relations beyond the national party*

system. Their response can be identified in new and sometimes innovative structures, policies and relationships. All political parties introduced policy and programmatic programme changes to take advantage of the opportunities offered by the European perspective and created internal structures to better deal with European issues. They have also been very keen on enhancing their relations beyond the national party system, mainly with the relevant European Parliament political group and with their counterpart parties in other European countries. European politicians are invited to take the floor in the assemblies and congresses of Cypriot political parties mainly during election campaigns, but not only then.

As far as the legislative harmonisation process is concerned, the Cypriot case is quite idiosyncratic and atypical. All parties reached a significant level of consensus regarding the course of Cypriot accession and recognised the urgency of rapid harmonisation. As a result, out of the 620 bills concerning harmonization, 614 passed unanimously.⁵ This atypical behaviour on the part of political parties could be attributed to what Kreppel (1999) calls a “sign of institutional maturity” as evidenced by their respect for compromise in the name of the greater good.

Another interesting aspect of the transformation of Cypriot political parties through the European integration process has been the educational role they perform. Increased awareness of European issues and the training of their respective political elites as they confront more complicated problems in the European political system are two significant features of this role. All political parties are performing this role with varying degrees of intensity and success.

Cypriot political parties have viewed European integration not only as a means of pursuing their own self-interested goals, but also as a potentially positive factor in the quest for internal reunification of the island. This belief has had far-reaching consequences for their

⁵ Source: Proceedings from the Parliamentary discussions regarding the state’s budgets (8-10 January 2003).

overall assessment of EU integration as well as cross-community (Greek-Turkish) and cross-party cooperation.

The polity level

Reforms at the level of polity are by definition complex and thus any effort in this direction needs time to produce results. At this point in time, it may not be appropriate to evaluate changes at this level. Nevertheless, a few trends are already perceptible in the context of the country's participation in the public debate on the Future of Europe.

The Parliament has been very successful in seizing the opportunity to introduce a number of innovative interactive features into its consultations on key European issues and more important, into its rapport with civil society. The results of this institutional change can be clearly identified and linked to Europeanisation as changes have been introduced on the occasion of the public debate on the Future of Europe, during the work of the Convention of the Future of Europe: new relationships between Parliament and society, more transparent and participatory political processes, a more visible role for women. The Parliament organised a series of conferences as an innovative consultation method. Public participation in these conferences was remarkably high and unique for Cypriot domestic politics (Agapiou-Josephides 2003).

Changes in the Executive and the Judiciary are more difficult to identify at this stage. In the case of the mass media it is hard to disentangle the impact of European integration from other causes of institutional or policy change, such as globalisation or endogenous political reforms.

The society level

There is strong support among Cypriot policy elites and the public for the view that the EU has served not only as a catalyst for change and modernisation, but also as a motivating and unifying force towards a more peaceful coexistence among the different communities inhabiting the island, alongside the UN Secretary

General's efforts to devise a solution to the Cyprus question between 1999 and early 2003. The fact that Cyprus's accession has been massively supported both by Greek-Cypriots and Turkish-Cypriots, has also opened new perspectives for peace in the country, which has been divided since 1974; 72% of people in Cyprus think that membership of the European Union is "a good thing" and 84 % would vote in favour of country's accession to the EU, if a referendum were to be held.⁶ According to Candidate Countries Eurobarometer 2002, First Results – Northern Cyprus, 88% of adults and teenagers think that membership would be "a good thing" and 88% of the voting age population would definitely vote for EU membership.

The Convention on the Future of Europe represents one of the first instances in which the enlarged EU attempted to achieve consensus in such a heterogeneous setting and the governments of 28 countries involved in the public debate on the Future of Europe expressly attempted to elicit the support and participation of ordinary citizens. It is worth referring to the Parliament's initiative of organising a series of conferences devoted to the future of Europe. Citizens had the opportunity to discuss the cultural aspects of European integration, the role of national parliaments and European institutions, youth etc. It is important to emphasize that this series of conferences attracted a large number of participants from a wide range of social organisations: representatives of the Chamber of Commerce and technical guilds, local authorities, trade unions, higher education institutions and university students organisations; organisations representing the interests of women, consumers, farmers, human rights advocates, scientists and mass media. The relatively high participation of women and youth signifies how groundbreaking the conference was, as it opened up new patterns of interaction between the Parliament and civil society. People had the opportunity to express views underscoring the common values and principles of European citizens: democracy, political stability, legitimacy, human rights, the protection of minorities and tolerance; the contribution of European

⁶ Source: Eurobarometer 2003.2: Public Opinion in Candidate Countries, p.69-72.

citizenship to the development of a communal ethos and European identity. A core concern expressed by participants was that European institutions should follow transparent procedures in daily business that can be easily comprehended by the general public.

For applicant countries, the Convention exercise prepared their first and most challenging collective exercise. The potential benefits of “learning-by-doing” for government officials, civil servants, business and trade union representatives and ordinary citizens participating in the process should not be underestimated. Hence, their political socialisation within the EU system is a fundamental first step towards full participation.

As a matter of fact, all political parties in the Republic of Cyprus are in favour of the country’s accession to the EU. In such a context where people almost unanimously agree on the European perspective of their country, it is not surprising that civil society has already developed, through networking, close ties with counterpart organisations at the EU level or at national level from other European countries.

Conclusion

It would be naïve to expect that the EU accession process could generate extensive and rapid changes in the political system of Cyprus and in the patterns of its domestic polity, politics and policies. Due to its dynamic nature, EU adaptation pressure, whether low, moderate or high, has produced at a gradual pace far-reaching changes in some areas, and in others change is not particularly marked yet, though important in the long run. This study adopts the observation that the scope of domestic adaptation is constrained by the macro-institutional context; notwithstanding the fact that Europeanisation may sometimes imply sectoral revolutions at the domestic level.

Empirical evidence provides that a number of innovative features have been introduced into its political system: new relationships between the Parliament and society, more transparent and participatory political processes, a more visible role for women and

youth and perhaps most important, an environment conducive to future peace and cooperation among Greek-Cypriots and Turkish-Cypriots.

The staying power of these reforms depends on the continuity of political leadership, the establishment of a political culture matching the institutional innovations, and resistance to the endemic temptation to use them for partisan purposes. We hope that this study has at least provided a base of suggestive interpretations and empirical data to inspire future research in this unexplored field.

This empirical study, the first to touch upon some aspects of the political system of Cyprus with respect to Europeanisation is of course far from being exhaustive. It constitutes a first attempt to shed more detailed light on the interaction between domestic politics and European integration at various levels and fields and underlines the fact that the patterns of domestic politics combine continuity, change and adaptation. It highlights the gradual yet significant developments in the political system of Cyprus and invites further research.

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