

Party-society relations in the Republic of Cyprus: Political and societal strategies

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Although a small nation on the periphery of the Eastern Mediterranean, the island of Cyprus has tended to attract academic interest due to its longstanding problem known as the ‘Cyprus problem’. There is a substantial volume of scholarly works drawing from various fields such as political science, international relations, law, history, sociology, and media studies that focus on the various political and societal dynamics triggered by the Cyprus problem. More recently, Cyprus hit the global headlines at the height of the financial crisis as one of the Eurozone countries that received a bailout from the so-called Troika. Depositors were bailed-in and two of its major banks collapsed (one since rescued) as it became the first Eurozone country to introduce countrywide capital controls -a full two years before Greece did. The impact of the financial crisis has led to further academic interest in the politics of countries afflicted by the tumultuous events. Despite such renewed academic attention, there is to date a limited, systematic literature for the analyst to consult on the politics and society of Cyprus.

It is against this backdrop that the edited book “*Party-society relations in the Republic of Cyprus. Political and societal strategies*” by Charalambous and Christophorou fills an important gap. For the reader interested in contemporary Cypriot politics it constitutes an invaluable first port of call. The volume’s central concept, partitocracy, provides the unifying theme to examine party-society relations over time across a heterogenous set of chapters that range from a focus on political parties, civil society organisations to crucial policy issues such as migration. Partitocracy goes well beyond a descriptive depiction of the dominant position of political parties in all aspects of society and politics. Instead, it becomes an explanatory concept of the so-called phenomenon of ‘political parallelism’ that pervades all dimensions of political and social life in Cyprus. Throughout the chapters, the various authors demonstrate the way in which partitocracy is central to understanding the dominance of political parties as virtually the sole intermediating actor between the

political system and society. Interestingly, and in contrast to other crisis-stricken countries across the EU, partitocracy has produced a very stable party system in Cyprus that not even the crisis managed to shake up. Unfortunately, this resilience comes at a great cost -one that over time undermines the representational, deliberative and participatory aspects of democratic society. This, then, constitutes one of the central messages of the edited volume and it is one that the various authors grapple with as they explore the multiple ways in which partitocracy structures political and societal relations in Cyprus.

The edited volume has a tripartite structure of the book consisting of section I on political parties and their strategies, section II on civil society groups and their strategies and section III on Cyprus-specific topics and the ways political elites interact with society in addressing them. Starting from the first section, namely “Party strategies towards society”, three chapters focusing on the four major parties in Cyprus, AKEL, DISY, DIKO and EDEK. All chapters are rich and informative and follow a similar structure in terms of presenting the main parties. In doing so, an implicit dialogue is created between them. In addition, the authors show how the ideological positions of the political parties helps to account for intra- as well as inter-party processes. Where information on intra-party processes of DISY is more limited, the DISY chapter by Katsourides manages to fill this gap by engaging in a discussion with the wider literature on political parties which provides the lens through which we can understand DISY’s evolution over time. For the interested reader, a more general theoretical frame to categorize EDEK and DIKO would have complemented the rich and at times thick description of the two parties’ history. While the party chapters constitute a valuable depository of the history, ideology, evolution of the four parties, the topic of how parties adapt to the challenges posed by new technologies and a new media landscape is not taken up. As someone who is interested in these aspects of inter-party competition and intra party adaptation I would have liked to learn how Cypriot parties have responded to such challenges that are afflicting parties in contemporary democratic settings.

The second part of the book under the title “Societal strategies towards parties” brings together three chapters that explore the link between civil society organizations (CSOs) and political parties. Inspired by a Gramscian approach, civil society is understood in a formal sense with the various chapters focusing on organisations, such as the church (Chapter 5), trade unions (Chapter 6) and CSO that defends the rights of the LGBTI community (chapter 7). Chapter five by Panayiotou offers a

historical account based on a Marxist perspective that uses social class as a unit of analysis and provides an enlightening discussion on the role of church. Chapter 6 by Ioannou provides a good review of trade unions in Cyprus and the critical historical junctures that have shaped their evolution in the context of a partitocracy. This helps the reader understand why trade unions in Cyprus, unlike most other nations in Europe, have managed to retain their membership. In a theoretically informed case study of LGBTI rights, Kammenou shows through linkage studies how parties have adopted as a political strategy to deal with sexual politics a non-interaction principle. This has put civil society organisations on LGBTI rights in the margin of any decision-making underlining parties' conservative stance and unwillingness to be engaged in a social dialogue.

Although aspects of the general discussion on civil society could be improved, such as more elaboration of the dominant role of the church in Cyprus or reducing the overlap of information regarding the political parties described in the first part of the book when dealing with trade unions, the general reader is provided with good insight into the operation of CSOs in Cypriot society.

The third section of the book under the title "Cross-case perspectives" consists of another set of three chapters. More specifically, Chapter 8 presents a case study focusing on the relationship between the Cyprus intercommunal peace movement and the elite-driven peace process in relation to the Cyprus problem. Vogel shows convincingly how uneasy the symbiosis between political elites and civil society organizations is in any negotiation process of the Cyprus problem mainly due to the dominant role held by parties and their unwillingness to open up the process. In Chapter 9, an interpretative methodology is used to analyse political-electoral discourse. By analysing how youth political organizations communicate and interact with the parties they are linked to it, brings to the fore the power and hierarchies imposed by the political parties themselves. In the last chapter of this section, the issue of immigration into Cyprus is cogently used to uncover the relations between state, parties and society. Trimikliniotis attributes the authoritarian attitudes towards migrants to a distorted public sphere that is in turn largely a consequence of post-colonial transformation.

In dealing with the ideological cleavages that separate political parties on a series of economic and social issues, the chapter on migration raises a crucial aspect of political competition -the social and cultural dimension. It is noteworthy that only towards the end of the volume does this element emerges in the book's discus-

sion. Throughout the various chapters, Cypriot parties are generally characterised as left, right or centre, or with phrases such as ‘representing the centre pole’ for example. The assignment of such ideological positions to Cypriot parties suggests a single dimension of party competition. However, a single overarching left/right dimension is insufficient to account for the ideological structure of political competition in Cyprus. Parties such as DIKO may be centrist on some putative economic dimension, but they are less so on social issues not to mention the Cyprus problem. It is true that the lack of an established election study tradition makes it difficult to infer this from public opinion data, for instance, regarding the attitudes of party supporters. However, there is party positioning data that would show this tendency, one that is increasingly common among many European nations. As someone who is interested in the positioning of parties across multiple issue areas, I would have liked to learn more about how parties in Cyprus are grappling with a host of issues related to identity, culture and social mores that are generating new forms of political conflict across most of Europe.

As is the case with many edited volumes, some chapters will lack consistency and continuity, to the extent that this might be the case the concluding chapter by Kitromilides masterfully summarises the essence of the chapters in the book while linking them to the island’s colonial history and the ideological legacy of nationalism that he re-evaluates through the concept of partitocracy. Overall, this edited volume by Charalambous and Christophorou provides an extensive analysis of the nature and quality of parties in Cyprus, their link with society and their effect on democracy in the island. For anyone interested, in politics in Cyprus and how the country represents an ideal case of partitocracy in Europe, this book provides an indispensable toolkit.

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