



When the French and Cypriots talk about Europe

By Fanny Cheyrou and Natalie Hami

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WITH RECORD ABSTENTIONS recorded in the May 2014 MEP elections throughout the whole of the EU, but especially among youth, questions beg to be asked as to what's amiss within an institution that was born out of the desire to create not only peace, but an inherent willingness to cooperate.

According to a post-election survey conducted by TNS Opinion, abstentions are becoming more marked with the greatest abstention amongst young people, aged 18-24.

Homing in on France and Cyprus, two very different countries, it becomes apparent that though they joined the EU under very different pretexts – France was a founding member and Cyprus joined in 2004 – both countries' youth are suffering from grave disillusionment towards the EU. TNS Opinion's survey states that Cyprus' abstention rate was 56.03 per cent with France's abstention rate at 57.57 per cent.

According to the survey, from respondents in Cyprus aged 18-24 around 29 per cent voted and from respondents aged 25-39 around 32 per cent voted. In France, from respondents aged 18-24 around 25 per cent voted, while from respondents aged 25-39 around 30 per cent voted. The question of voting is one of paramount importance and intrinsically linked to how people feel about the EU and its effectiveness. Delving deeper into how both countries' youth feel about the EU as an institution and where it's headed, a number of interviews were conducted with youth of varying ages and professions, revealing extremes of those who believe in the EU and the power of voting, and those who did not vote and strongly believe that more ought to be done to engage Europe's youth.

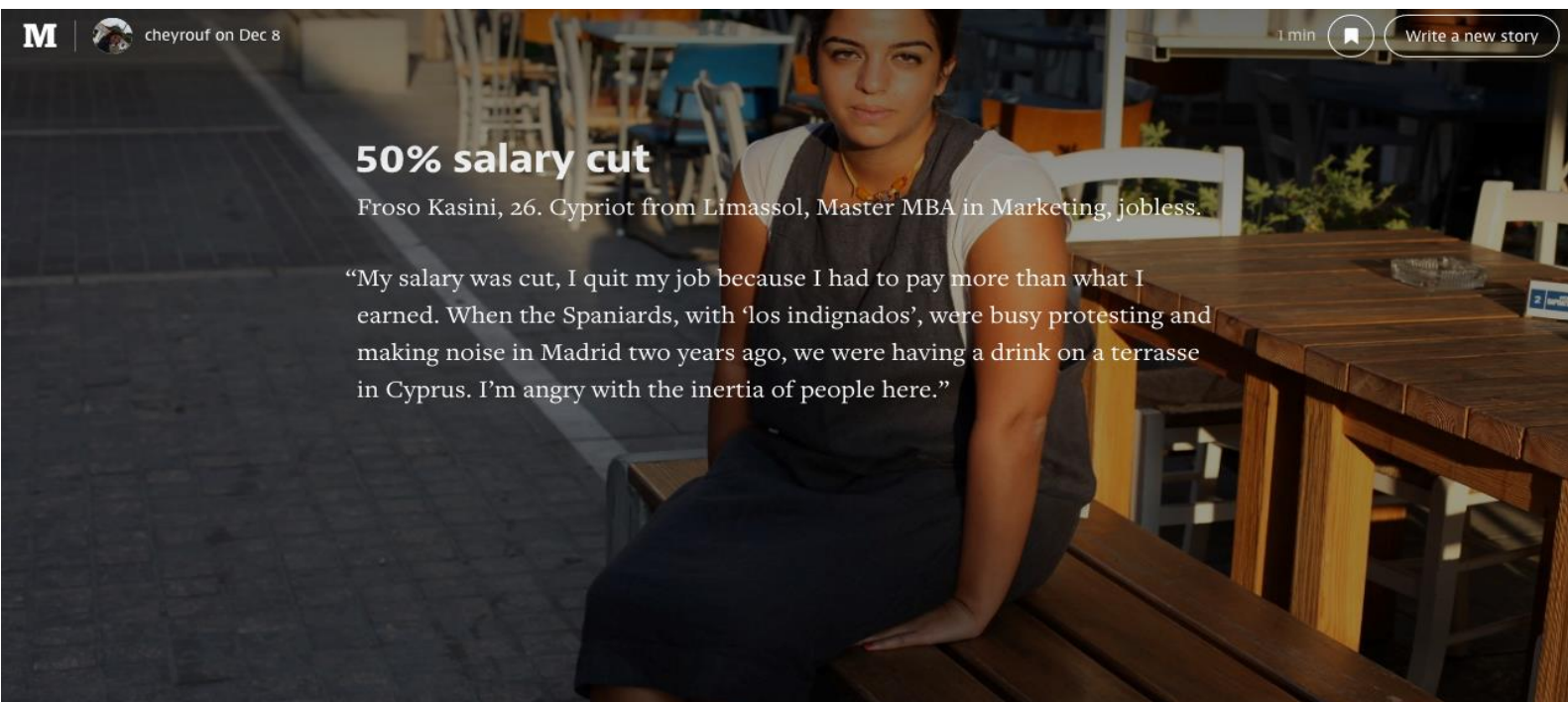
Most importantly though how can anyone be expected to vote for a politician, party or even begin to get involved in the working of the EU without knowing anything about it?

## ‘We don’t need no education’<sup>1</sup>

How can one educate a European citizen? By telling him/her a story at the age of 6. A story that would begin with: “Once upon a time...”, suggests Alexandra Attalides, Head of the European Parliament in Cyprus. She made youth a big priority during the last MEP campaign. “Because Europe is a story, and we all have a lot to learn from it”, she said. Yet finding a way to talk ‘as simply’ to little ones as to grown ups turned out to be anything but ‘simple’. In Cyprus, 50 per cent of the campaign led by the European Parliament was related to the young generation: an interactive website was made, Facebook and Twitter were in full swing, European representatives visited Cypriot universities, villages and schools. “We are still too far away from citizens, we need to inform them. There is a lack of knowledge about Europe. We have to revive the story of a peaceful union and encourage young people to know and learn to know their neighbours”.

The issue of education within schools first and foremost has thus become paramount in informing, from a young age, on the EU.

Currently working but also completing a masters, 24-year-old Emma Labuzan says: “I had a few classes [on the EU] but they were really brief, there should be more emphasis at school though as it’s not enough. There should be more emphasis at school as voting is a duty, it should be mandatory. We’re not informed enough but we also don’t try to inform ourselves.” Almost the same age as Labuzan, Froso Kasini, 26, advertising agent, lives on the other side of the Mediterranean, in Cyprus. She rolls a cigarette at the terrace of a café in Limassol when she remembers: “In 2000 we would learn a few things about the way the European Union was built at the very beginning. But we were only candidate for the entrance in the European Union at the time. Then, during the exams, we had to write essays about Europe. Now I am angry because it was all a utopia.”



<sup>1</sup> Pink Floyd’s “Another Brick in the wall”

In Bordeaux, France, Gabrielle Steiblen, 22, however states that during her college and high school years teachers did explain how the various institutions of the EU functioned, but feels that ‘they did not explain the benefits of the EU and especially its impact on everyday life’. This is also aptly highlighted by Helena Pierides, secretary and Solonas Karoullas, alumni officer, European Youth Parliament (EYP) Cyprus National Committee, who commented that educating the youth on the foundations of European Union institutions is vital. “Youngsters should familiarise themselves with the European sphere from an early age, enabling them to have a clear understanding on how the Union works and how it affects them. For example, Cyprus joined the EU while we were still at school - it would have been greatly beneficial learning the basics of the EU as an institution in advance and why countries find it so appealing,” said Pierides.

### **Who said European values?**

In Toulouse, France, young primary school teacher Anaïs Brunaux, 27, does not feel European and thus feels unable to transmit anything to a child. “I will make an effort to convey what the programmes ask in our referential of competence, common skills to all teachers: ‘to share the values of the Republic’, as I am French. But I do not know what to say to children about the EU.” On the core curriculum of skills ‘level 2’, a mention was added: “Recognise the symbols of the Republic and the European Union.” Anaïs Brunaux conceded that it would be a good initiative to convey the feeling of a European identity to children from an early age. “But before that, we should train teachers themselves. Because I have no idea what the European values are.”

There is a lack of curiosity, young Cypriot teacher Venia Papa noticed: “Of course it is important to educate people but at some point one has to be curious and learn by himself. Young Cypriots are not able to point out Holland on a map and the French are not better when we mention Latvia. It is not only the responsibility of the European Union”. This 31-year-old has been teaching information and communication in Limassol and Paris VIII for a couple of years and used to work in the Cypriot European desk of Bruxelles. She adds: “You can learn a lot by yourself. Each time I had a project with my students, either in France or in Cyprus, we benefitted from a financial support from the European Union. But the action of the EU is much more visible in Cyprus than in France”.

At least, according to 24-year-old Clara<sup>2</sup>, a project manager for European cooperation, there is some education about European institutions but certainly more needs to be done in schools to understand the importance of voting. In Limassol, in the south of Cyprus, ‘most’ of Licourgos’ friends did not vote during the European elections. Lycourgos is 30, psychologist during the day and DJ at night: “If people don't see a straight impact on their life, then they are not interested in it. Government and banks have created a genuine consumerism in Cyprus. In my opinion, not to vote is not a solution. It is only losing an opportunity to give your opinion.”

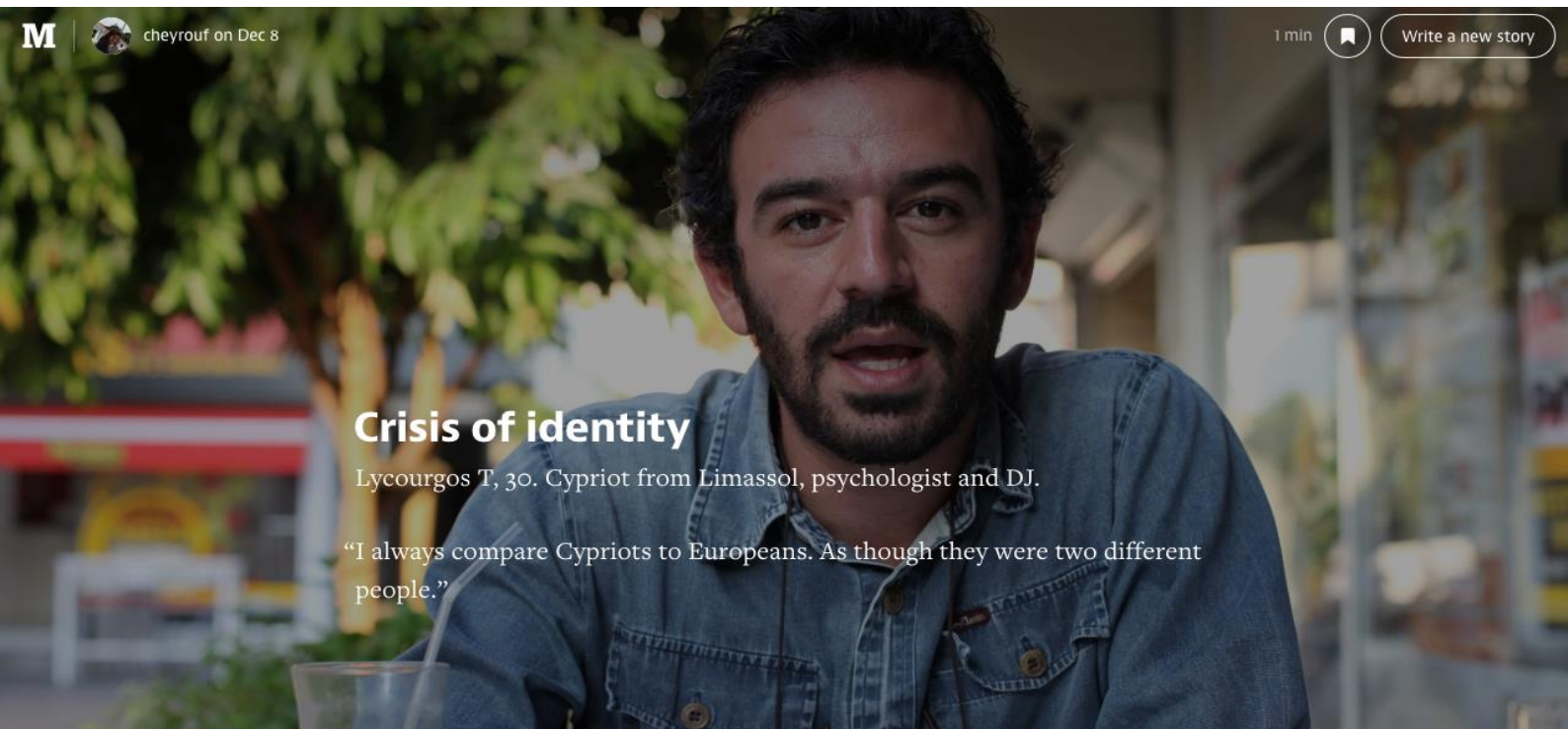
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<sup>2</sup> Clara did not want her full name mentioned



## Lack of identity

When Cyprus entered the European Union in 2009, Papa (teaching both in France and Cyprus) was among the people dancing in the streets and partying all night. A dream came true for her. Six years before, in 2003, the UN borders were opened in the north of the country: “We thought the EU would act as a mediator for the divided island, she says. But nothing changed. The most disappointed people today are our great-parents because they are witnesses of the war. They saw that the human rights were not respected by the Turkish army in the occupied part. As for our generation most of us do not understand what we are doing in the European Union. The lack of identity is all around us”.



### Crisis of identity

Lycourgos T, 30. Cypriot from Limassol, psychologist and DJ.

“I always compare Cypriots to Europeans. As though they were two different people.”

Behind a computer mixing a song of Serge Gainsbourg in a bar in Limassol, Lycourgos (psychologist and DJ) frowns: “The crisis that I'm more concerned about is the identity crisis we are going through. It is an identity crisis from inside and outside Cyprus. How to feel about Europe when you do not even know how to feel about your own country? The northern part of Cyprus is not Turkey, yet it is not Cyprus either. I don't want to have to show my ID card and pay to travel within my own territory. It's more than a mere matter of pride. It is a matter of identity.”

Two streets away from here, in front of another bar called Library in Limassol, Elaine Col, 48, Nadia Kassinou, 42 and Eirini Sofroniou, 42 (the bar owner) are having a drink. “I have a three year old girl, Eirini says. I am a positive person but I am afraid for her future. The next generation is lost. I had never been angry before. Now I am. European Union is just a set of tough and inhuman people who think they can lead that way. We have built our country upon an illusion: our parents were so proud of us when we were working for the

banks or for the government. Getting a loan was the meaning of success. Look now !” Her friend Elaine nods: “I believe in the word 'union'. But I'm afraid of what is behind that word. It should mean strength. But in the facts it is meaningless to us in Cyprus. The Troïka put everyone in the same basket. From outside, people must say 'Greeks, Cypriots, the same'. It is humiliating. No one knows about us.”

What worries Thomas Loizier, 26, French architect from Bordeaux, in terms of European identity, is more the loss of local identities and “the implementation of global standards.” Sanitary, economic, social standards do not make sense sometimes in my professional field. “Strong European laws and principles are necessary but I wish there was a stronger second level of organisation, hyper local policies that reinforce the local power and local initiatives and help to development around a local coherence. In order not to lose our specific identities – not only in France or Cyprus – but in regions, towns and villages of European countries. The global system inspired by the United States is not the system we need in Europe.”

### **How about the future?**

However with this level of discontent the future of the EU comes into question: where is it going and how is it getting there?

Andreas Georgiou, a 26-year-old who owns a communications company says: “We’re not sure if [the EU] is going to last as there are so many countries that are far away. We don’t want to make the conscious step that Europe is going to be big. It’s a mess, you want to feel that everyone is going together, we don’t feel the pull of the crowd though. You need someone [the government] to push and pull you.” Despite these obvious and significant short-comings, there are true believers of the EU and how it works, however both Cypriots and the French appear to feel that the EU is not acting and functioning as a single entity, this being the original purpose. Clara comments: “Europe is doing a lot of things but they’re not always strategic. It would be stronger if we could share a vision a single voice.”



## **Positive initiatives**

Christophe Blenet, 31. French from Paris. Research ingeneer.

“In my professional field, the EU has a lot to provide. In the field of energy, these last three years, I have had the opportunity to work on three European projects that clearly stimulated innovation, research and development of new standards.”

Vakis noted that the large rate of abstentions is evidence that things should be changed as to how Brussels handles certain issues. A similar sentiment was also reiterated by Labuzan who steadfastly says: “It can work – I’m for the EU, for the euro and for Schengen but it’s not well-managed. We don’t have the same politics as all those countries. There are some things that are missing – they should create cohesion.” Sagadaki explains that the Europe appears to have become drawn in to issues on a more national level. “Europe has got stuck in national interests and everything else has disappeared along the way.”

Reinforce the regional aspect. Revive the idea of community, cohabit with our differences. Emilie Déminière, 34, a special needs person living in a specialised institute near Bergerac, France, explains: “I know exactly what the word community means. Some people do not have the choice to depend on others. It is my case. Sometimes, by admitting we need each other, it is the beginning of productivity”. Dimitris Trimithiotis, 31, sociologist and teacher at the University of Nicosia concludes: “The future of Cyprus is now linked to the European destiny and so is the future of France.”

### 3 questions to Quentin Michelin, President of Eurofeel

*Eurofeel is a European student association of 180 members between 18 and 25 studying either at Bordeaux University or Sciences Po Bordeaux. It is a small non-activist, non-partisan and completely voluntary structure.*

*If the European Union was built "by an elite and from the top", the members of that association seek to make it accessible for anyone.*

<http://eurofeel.eu/>

#### **- Bordeaux, France, Europe: to what extent does an action at a very local level give more opportunities?**

The first criticism that we hear about the EU is that it is distant and far from citizens. It makes me think about: "Brussels against democracy." Eurofeel thinks differently.

The local level in Bordeaux gives us the opportunity to enhance the importance of community in a very concrete way in the field. Purchase a MRI equipment, support ecotourist initiatives, funding Cap Sciences, Europe is present in the daily lives of people locally speaking. One cannot see it, but it is there. We eat pizza, listen to ABBA, Led Zeppelin, we enjoy everyday, a common culture.



#### **Think Europe**

Quentin Michelin, 22. French from Bordeaux. Studying in Sciences po and President of the association Eurofeel.

"The European Union can be a fabulous tool, it can have an influence on the international stage with strong values. But this requires that citizens seize on it."

#### **- Why were young citizens so passive in the last European elections?**

Abstention shows that there is a marked lack of love between the youth on one hand, and



politicians and the European Union on the other hand. The European project does not make people dream anymore. Yet it is the only way to make things change and happen. The turf wars between the leaders of the member states have made things complicated. In 2005, the Constitutional Treaty also failed because it was not policy. This reflects the European Union itself. By avoiding opposition and confrontation, one makes it cold and boring. It does not encourage involvement. And now it will take time to catch up twenty years since Maastricht. If we want young people to be involved in European politics, we have to make it live, to stage it. The EU needs to be visible, issues must be visible. The EU can still be a dream for young people. It is necessary that the EU carries a message. It can be the message of a social Europe, of a green Europe, a European defence. One needs a project that inspires. A common project that makes you want to get involved, to stand for or against.

- **What, however, was encouraging in France?**

We were able to create through the elections the signs of a European political space. The nomination of European candidates heads of lists, but also by organising televised debates, the nomination of Jean-Claude Juncker, head of the winner list, as President of the Commission.

This political space is vital for the EU's image. From the moment the Brussels scene becomes a debate stage where people mobilize or divide, then it becomes a stage on which young people will have the opportunity to speak and get involved. The European Union can be a fabulous tool, able to bring our values on the international stage. But this requires that citizens get hold of it.

Full photography report on <https://medium.com/@fcheyrou/latest>

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