

Greece's Radical Politics on the Dark Side of Dawn

Written by Othon Anastasakis

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Greece's Golden Dawn has attracted political and scholarly attention as Europe's latest most violent and fast rising far right party. Its unprecedented success in the 2012 national elections and its growing popularity in the opinion polls since then, have raised questions regarding its origins, ideology, mobilisation, and its impact on the country's democracy. Following the assassination of the Greek rap singer, Pavlos Fyssas by a Golden Dawn member and the subsequent arrests of the party's leadership, there followed new allegations on the criminal nature of the organisation, questions about its funding and further revelations on the party's hierarchical structure, and its neo-nazi ideological foundations. With all this in mind, one is bound to ask whether this political phenomenon is a case of national exceptionalism, which emanates from Greece's uniqueness as a member state of the eurozone, or is it part of a wider rise of populism in austerity dominated Europe, one more case in the list of EU member state far right extremism? The answer to this question is very critical because it affects the way this problem is addressed.

Greek exceptionalism

According to this argument, the Golden Dawn is a case of Greek exceptionalism tied to the impact of Greece's "Great Depression". It is the direct outcome of the harshest, most extreme and punishing austerity policy cum fiscal consolidation that has ever been tried on a western territory. The electoral results of the Golden Dawn are directly correlated with the deepening of austerity, starting from a meagre 0.29% in the 2009 national elections and jumping to 6.9% in 2012. Since then, the Golden Dawn has drawn more sympathisers climbing in the third place and double digits percentage points, at the expense of all the other parties of the Greek political spectrum. Even after the police crackdown in October 2013, and the wave of domestic and international criticism and condemnation, the Golden Dawn's support retained its third position, albeit with lower percentages.

Greece's exceptionalism in its far right extremism is linked to a unique configuration of economic, social, political and external factors which include: a dramatic drop of the national GDP by a cumulative 25% during six continuous years of recession; rapid rise of unemployment to 27% in 2013 and youth unemployment at 60%; rising levels of income inequalities; mistrust and disengagement from party politics; external pressures from international markets and creditors; international isolation and negative publicity abroad; loss of national sovereignty and increasing powers handed to the Troika over the running of domestic affairs; spectacular reduction of personal incomes; dramatic cuts of state services in health or education; and rising migratory waves combined with inadequate social policies and asylum services. All this has resulted in widespread societal reaction, collective and individual frustration, a significant part of which turned to the Golden Dawn. This unique configuration can only be compared with the case of inter-war Germany when the severity of the Great Depression, the external humiliation and the wounded sovereignty of the country led to the rapid rise of the Nazi party.

Greek exceptionalism is fostered by the fact that the crisis ridden countries of the eurozone periphery have not witnessed a similar rise of the radical right. Italy, Spain, Portugal and Ireland, despite being at the heart of the eurozone recession, they have withstood the "evil attraction" of the far right and have kept such forces marginalised.[1] While all these societies have been bearing the pressures of the international markets and have been protesting against the austerity measures imposed by the IMF and the northern European creditors, they have not directed their electoral frustration towards far right formations. Among them, in Italy where disdain for the political establishment reached Greek levels, popular reaction turned towards Pepe Grillo's Five Star Movement, but not

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towards the traditional neo-fascist party whose electoral strength dropped in the 2012 national elections.[2] Moreover, the Spanish, Portuguese and Irish electorates contained their electoral choices within the existing mainstream alternatives of centre right and centre left. While the countries of Southern Europe have been experiencing a similar aversion towards the political establishment, political corruption, high unemployment rates and waves of immigration, it is only in Greece that the neo-nazi party has surged with such aplomb.

Having said that, the exceptionalist version is not simply tied to austerity related arguments. There are some who argue that Greece's traditional cultural intolerance, based on a majoritarian self-perception as a monolingual, Christian orthodox and homogeneous population, is legitimising extremist discourses.[3] Others blame political opportunism, and the absence of political alternatives which are facilitating the rise of far right extremism.[4] All these arguments point to the uniqueness of the Greek case in Europe, making the Golden Dawn a very special expression of fast rising extremism. With this in mind, Greek exceptionalism is embed in a paradox when one considers that Greece has never had a legacy of neo-nazi far right politics and had been one of the most tormented cases of the Nazi occupation with painful memories among the older generations.

EU case of member state far right extremism

The other school of thought sees the populist radical right as a perennial feature in Europe's political landscape, and Greece's Golden Dawn as part of the current rise of the "far right European family", next to other influential cases in Austria, Hungary, France, Netherlands or Finland. According to this perspective the rise of the populist radical right in Europe is the outcome of the failure of mainstream democracy to meet the needs of the citizens,[5] with more parties reacting to the European Union's shortcomings, to bail-out policies, to austerity measures or immigration.[6] Europe is currently alerted by the rise of European far right and extremist parties which are increasingly euro-sceptic, xenophobic, anti-immigration, anti-systemic and racist. In 2013, about half of EU member states have a radical right party in their national parliament and two in their national government, as junior partners (Bulgaria and Latvia); six EU countries including Greece have seen a substantial rise of radical right electoral support (Austria, Finland, France, Hungary and Latvia). Moreover, the discussion on far right extremism in Europe is often confounded with the rise of populism and euroscepticism, thus intensifying the impression of a rising tide of radicalism and reactionism in Europe.

While the rise of far right extremism is developing into a worrying European phenomenon, there are national variations and different emphases among the diverse cases. As such, Britain's UKIP, not the conventional type of far right extremism is firmly anti-European; France's Front National emphasises economic protectionism and anti-immigration; in the Netherlands, the Party of Freedom is against Islam and with a strong assimilationist stance on the integration of immigrants; in Hungary, the Jobbik party professes outright hatred for Jews and Roma. The Greek case bears some interesting similarities with Hungary's extreme right party including a reaction to the economic crisis, cultural nationalist fears and perceived threats from neighbours.[7] Within this context of rising European extremism, the Greek far right is trying to build links with similar political formations in Italy or Germany and to create its own networks and outposts in Cyprus.

Responses to the Greek case

The adoption of one or the other approach has affected the way the international community has responded to this phenomenon. Those who are guided by the Greek exceptionalist argument have opted for external pressure on Greek national authorities to combat the rise of far right extremism. Following the 2012 elections and the dramatic rise of the Golden Dawn in Greek politics, a series of international reports have been calling upon the Greek government to control and react to this dangerous rise. The Greek government has been criticised for its inaction by the Council of Europe's Commissioner for Human Rights,[8] and has been under pressure from the European Parliament, the Jewish lobby in the United States or the Human Rights Watch, the latter documenting the rising violence on the Greek streets against immigrants and associating the increasing anti-immigrant crime with Golden Dawn members. External pressure may have been one of the reasons why the Greek government of New Democracy at last decided to react, following a long period of permissiveness, diversion of the attention towards far left extremism and adoption of some hard line arguments on the issue of immigration or internal security.

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Those who adopt the more European perspective, point to the harm that dangerous parties such as the Golden Dawn, the Front National or Jobbik are posing to Europe's democratic tradition. At the heart of the matter lies the fear that in the May 2014 European Parliament elections, the extremist and euro-sceptic parties will record a strong presence, and will change the face of the Parliament for the next five years. At the same time, the European Commission appears to be lacking a political strategy focusing exclusively on the future of the banking union and the monitoring of the national budgets. Within an increasingly intergovernmental European Union, under the ideological hegemony of Germany, the Commission advocates austerity and reform in the hope that it will bring back growth and competitiveness in Europe, and will be the panacea for all the political problems and the social misgivings. There is no policy towards the rise of the far right and the limited voices which mostly come from the European Parliamentarians, are calling for a stricter EU monitoring of the member states' democratic practices. This is the case of the Demos report which responds to what it perceives as democratic backsliding in many countries of Europe and calls for vigilance, monitoring and assessing the democratic politics in the EU member states.[9] Greece, in particular has been of major concern with its democratic backsliding, where the Golden Dawn holds a prominent role.

While the Golden Dawn contributes to the ideological dynamism of the racist and exclusionary European discourse, it is still not part of the wider European family of right-wing extremism. Because of its aggressive and highly illegal and criminal nature it does not fit conveniently into the European group of euro-sceptic, anti-immigration parties. Most of the established western European far right parties want to distance themselves from the aggression and raw hooliganism of the Golden Dawn in their effort to appeal to wider audiences and build coalitions in view of the coming European elections.[10] This is why Marine Le Pen rushed to distance herself from the Golden Dawn soon after the leadership of the party was apprehended and jailed for involvement in the death of Pavlos Fyssas and the subsequent allegations of criminal activities. While the parties of the traditional extreme right, whose prototype and front-runner is the French Front National, are changing their discourse in order to appear more mainstream and to cultivate relations with other established far right parties in Europe, the Golden Dawn goes the opposite direction of violence and hooliganism and extreme right wing politics in Greece are turning more ferocious and illegal.

In the end, the Golden Dawn is as much a national as it is a European problem. At the national level, it upsets Greek democracy and puts in jeopardy all the achievements of the post-1974 democratic consolidation. The Golden Dawn feeds from economic misery, and the short-termism and political opportunism of the mainstream parties. It holds a discourse of reaction and racism that will continue to torment Greek society, in and/or beyond parliamentary politics. From a European perspective, it leaves a bad taste in the mouth of the European elites who may be gloating on having solved one problem, but they are certainly landed with a new one equally worrying. While the Eurozone economy appears to be gradually stabilising and the euro has survived, most European states of the EU will now have to face up to the political implications of the EU's choice of "reluctant solidarity and forced shared responsibility". The management of the eurozone crisis has alienated Europe's people on both sides of the European divide –the affluent north and the suffering south- for different reasons and has led many of them in the embrace of euroscepticism, negative stereotyping and scapegoating. Most governments of the right and the left are now forced to dance to the tunes of the euro-sceptic and phobic extreme right. In that respect, the Greek far right stands out as the ugliest reflection in the deforming mirror of the dark side of the European Union.

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