

# The Resurgence of Right-Wing Extremism in Greece: A Not So Golden Dawn

Written by Nadia Banteka

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NADIA BANTEKA, DEC 14 2013

The revival across Europe of organizations and political parties founded on ideals rooted in the extreme nationalism and populism that characterized the interwar period fascist and Nazi parties has triggered a bewilderingly scanty level of attention and response. As a recent note by the United Nations Secretary General underlines, “neo-fascism and neo-Nazism are gaining ground in many countries, especially in Europe. This is reflected by the electoral victories of extreme right parties advocating xenophobia, attacks on ethnic, national, religious minorities, and racial or ethnic purity in the countries where they are active.”<sup>[1]</sup>

Mainstream political parties tend to quickly dismiss the new emerging radical right as “fascist,” indirectly suggesting that they lack legitimacy by default. There is a strong temptation to equate and associate this new wave of extreme right with the old version of the fascist and Nazi parties from the 1930s-40s.<sup>[2]</sup> However, I argue that although intuitively appealing, under a closer examination, it becomes evident that the new extreme right parties are an updated and progressed version of the old ones. This is in part due to the circumstances within which they have evolved and due to a reconstruction of their political discourse in order to gain ground, popularity, and legitimacy. The recent advances in our interpretation of these extreme right-wing movements suggest that they wish to be understood as a radical form of nationalism,<sup>[3]</sup> which is aimed at mobilizing national resources towards rehabilitating the vulnerable and at times decayed state.

The traditional fascist and Nazi regimes of the 1922-1945 period were comprised of movements that derived their identity from essentially being “anti-movements”: anti-liberalist, anti-democratic, anti-communist, anti-capitalist, anti-bourgeois.<sup>[4]</sup> Although the new extreme right continues to be anti-bourgeois, the rise of the middle class in Europe has shifted its polemic antipathy from the bourgeoisie that has become a social minority to those that constitute “alien” pieces in society: immigrants, refugees, homosexuals, et al, especially those coming from different ethnic as well as racial backgrounds.

Though even among the contemporary extreme right parties one may still be able to identify splinter groups that are vocally hostile to liberal and parliamentary democracy, the majority is not at least openly anti-democratic. On the contrary, they actively embrace the democratic liberal system through engaging with it both in terms of participation as well as in seizing the resources it provides, and attempting to play by the rules of the pre-established game.<sup>[5]</sup> Nonetheless, although the majority of the parties that are on the extreme right end of the spectrum do not openly describe themselves as anti-democratic, they strongly express, at least implicitly, anti-systemic ideas and attitudes. They can be described as anti-egalitarian,<sup>[6]</sup> anti-pluralist, and therefore fundamentally opposed to the founding principles of the democratic political system.

### Golden Dawn

Since the end of World War II,<sup>[7]</sup> the legacy of authoritarianism limited the electoral demand for extreme right political groups and parties in Europe. When and where such groups emerged they were quickly dismissed by mainstream politics and were either absorbed by right-wing parties or marginalized to the fringes of the political system. Despite the sporadic successes of extreme right-wing political parties in the past two decades, not much attention was paid

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to a potential wave of extreme right resurgence taking place in Europe. It is for this reason that the electoral success of Golden Dawn in Greece took many by surprise. Up until the 2012 Greek elections, Golden Dawn had received 0.29% of the vote in the 2009 elections, a percentage that accounted for an almost negligible amount of votes.<sup>[8]</sup> The first electoral success of Golden Dawn came in 2010 in the municipal elections shortly after the aftershocks of the financial crisis had started to be felt in Greece. There, Golden Dawn's leader received a surprising 5.29% and a seat on the Athens city council, which marked the start of an increasing popularity within the Greek society as it moved Golden Dawn from oblivion to the public eye.

In terms of its official ideology, Golden Dawn embraces nationalism as “the third major ideology of history.”<sup>[9]</sup> As a typical extreme right party, Golden Dawn effectively parallels the nation with the state and ethnicity with citizenship. It understands democracy to “mean state of the demos, that is of the People, made up of individuals of common descent.”<sup>[10]</sup> The establishment of an ethnically pure state is not only a goal in itself but will also bring, according to Golden Dawn, the “radical renewal of discarded and fake social values” that will save the nation from national decadence. In a similar vein, Golden Dawn attacks the “corrupt political establishment” which it sees as selling off Greek sovereignty.<sup>[11]</sup> On the issue of immigration Golden Dawn has a firm position of demanding the immediate deportation of all illegal immigrants as well as the criminal prosecution of those employing immigrants illegally. In its campaign for the 2012 elections, Golden Dawn not only openly issued threats of violence against parliamentary deputies who opposed its policies but has also been involved in numerous violent incidents across Greece.

On September 28<sup>th</sup>, 2013, over 20 Golden Dawn MPs and members were arrested for their alleged involvement in and management of a criminal organization. Those arrested faced a series of charges including multiple charges for murder, assault, blackmail, and money laundering. Several days later most of those arrested were released on bail and the party still remains legal and convenes in the Parliament. Even though these cases are now to be handled by the Greek judiciary, the crackdown serves to showcase how deeply rooted and pervasive the problem of right-wing extremism is in Greek society and institutions. The DA's findings include, among others, the implication of a number of police and army officers with Golden Dawn. Further, allegations in the findings of combat groups organized by the party, formally training in army camps with the blessing of senior army officials are also indicative of how tangled up the political and social fabric is to this issue and raises questions about the efficacy of Greek democracy and its institutions.

## The Financial, Political, And Social Crisis

In order to fully comprehend the factors that generated the hefty realignment of the Greek electorate, it is vital to appreciate both the nature of the Modern Greek political system as well as the effects of the recent financial crisis in contributing to the delegitimization of the *status quo*. The Greek political system has long been thought to be in crisis,<sup>[12]</sup> suffering from high levels of corruption, a clientele based election system and populist trends.<sup>[13]</sup> While the longstanding plague of the Greek political system was identified by many, it was equally tolerated and nurtured as it provided a predictable way of “getting things done” both on the part of the politicians as well as their constituencies. All this, until the financial crisis hit, in an abrupt way forced the political system to realize and come face-to-face with its longstanding problems.

Despite popular belief, I argue that right-wing extremism is not necessarily bolstered during periods of financial recession, or rather, due to periods of financial recession. Commentators and scholars rush to draw analogies between Hitler's 1930's Weimar Germany as a paradigmatic example of how financial crises lead to electoral victories of the extreme right inasmuch as people abandon rationality and resort to radical populism. This is in part highly plausible; however, financial crises do not exist in isolation from the rest of the sociopolitical condition. They bring with them heavy sociopolitical issues such as unemployment, welfare seizure, intolerance, fear of immigration, and of everything that stands as “alien”, as well as an increase in crime rates.<sup>[14]</sup> The financial crisis can therefore be seen to constitute only the tip of the iceberg of a much deeper and multidimensional crisis over national identity, culture, and way of life, leading to a conflict and arguably a crisis of legitimacy towards the political system.<sup>[15]</sup>

The Greek political system has found itself at a crossroad. The period from the end of the military junta of 1974 and the restoration of democracy has been based on a relatively stable bipartisan system that secured the country's path

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towards the European Union. These developments also brought an enhancement of civil rights and freedoms, an expansion of the welfare state, and increased levels of development and growth. On the flip side, this period was also characterized by systemic corruption, public administration failures, and a large accumulation of public debt.<sup>[16]</sup> The financial crisis that fully broke out in Greece in 2008 generated a political transition reflected in the sudden reduction of the two main political parties', PASOK and New Democracy, electoral shares. The two parties witnessed their shares drop from a cumulative average of 80% to an unprecedented low of 32% in May 2012 and 42% in the repeat elections of June 2012.<sup>[17]</sup>

This sudden and vast change in electoral results reflects a general sentiment of delegitimization towards democratic institutions and their efficacy. They are no longer seen as carriers of public representation but of corruption, and are thought to require radical action in order to be repaired. This mentality and framework has since dominated the discourse within the Greek political system. Lacking rational and informed outlets for public debate, this shift has opened space not only for direct attack against core democratic institutions and their representatives but also a rupture of the social fabric leading to hate crime and marginalization against minorities such as immigrants, refugees, and members of the LGBT community.<sup>[18]</sup>

This climate of delegitimization of the Greek political system combined with its failure to provide alternative routes of political participation can explain in part the increased legitimization enjoyed by the extreme right and their use of violence as a tool for expression of political dissatisfaction. This new political culture manifests itself through the mainstreaming and normalization of right-wing extremism within the Greek society. Golden Dawn was best positioned to reap the benefit from this realignment of the Greek political electorate. Being at the margins of political culture in the past and far outside parliamentary politics, Golden Dawn was able to turn its pariah status into an emblem of political purity and desire for a radical transformation of past and present Greek politics.<sup>[19]</sup>

Golden Dawn captured 7% of the electorate and 18 seats in the Parliament during the last election making it the fifth largest party represented in the Greek Parliament. Golden Dawn won votes not only in the large urban centers where its supporters "stage pogroms against immigrants and battle with leftist youths and anarchists" but also across the country and demographics.<sup>[20]</sup> This normalization and institutionalization of what until a few years ago was an organization that epitomized anti-democratic rhetoric and openly promoted resort to violence as a form of political expression showcases how intrinsically interlinked the partisan political system is to micro-social civic culture.<sup>[21]</sup>

The financial crisis has not created Golden Dawn but it has most certainly brought to the forefront the shaky political foundations of the Greek society resulting in the political expression of extremism. Greece's post-dictatorship era was premised on weak democratic institutions, populism, clientelism, and corruption,<sup>[22]</sup> creating a climate that kept political radicalism dormant while covertly feeding its roots. The right-wing extremism phenomenon in Greece that so happens to be wearing the Golden Dawn hat this time around is a social and political issue with its heart laying on the flimsy foundation of the Modern Greek political system. It is precisely for this reason that any long-term solution to it may not be found solely by addressing the legal aspect of the Golden Dawn problem, as such approach will not achieve more than to sweep the beast of right-wing extremism under the rug. Equally important with the legal processes is a focus on the sociopolitical dimension including policies that will strengthen civil society, abolish past vicious cycles of political inertia and ineffectiveness, promote pluralism, establish a culture of tolerance, and respect for the rule of law. Only such climate will be able to foster political alternatives that will open the channels of genuine political change and block phenomena such as Golden Dawn and the rise of the extreme right.

Greece ought to seize this momentum as an opportunity to galvanize mature political discourse and a new set of political and civic engagement in building novel institutions based on true ideas of liberal democracy: representation, impartiality, tolerance, and meritocracy. It is only in this way that the legal course of action towards Golden Dawn will truly have an effect independent of the judicial outcome, and will not face the risk of raising Golden Dawn victorious in martyrdom. The fight against right-wing extremism is a question of survival for the Greek democracy. Right-wing extremism closely resembles the Lernaean Hydra, and if one aims for the head, the beast will only multiply. As such, it may only be eradicated through battling its source and burying it deep so that it may not rekindle. Such labor is the responsibility of the Greek society as a whole.

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<sup>[1]</sup> Hans-Georg Betz, *The Growing Thread of the Radical Right*, in *Right-Wing Extremism in the Twenty-First Century* 71 (Peter H. Merkel & Leonard Weinberg ed., 2003); see also James A. Gregor, *Fascism: Philosophy of Violence and the Concept of Terror*, in *The Mortality of Terrorism* (David C. Rapport & Yona Alexander ed., New York, Pergamon Press, 1982).

<sup>[2]</sup> See Betz, *supra* note 1, at fn 7.

<sup>[3]</sup> Interview with C. Bouchet, Far-Right Journalist (August. 16, 2002).

<sup>[4]</sup> Michael Minkenberg, *The Renewal of the Radical Right: Between Modernity and Anti-Modernity*, 35 *Government and Opposition* 170, 180 (2000).

<sup>[5]</sup> Ignazi 2001:371; See Jamin, *supra* note 23, at 47.

<sup>[6]</sup> Ehud Sprinzak, *The Psycho-Political Formation of Extreme Left Terrorism in a Democracy: The Case of the Weathermen*, in *Origins of Terrorism* 79 (Walter Reich ed., Cambridge University Press, 1990).

<sup>[7]</sup> See Kitschelt, *supra* note 9, at 52-54; Piero Ignazi, *Extreme Right Parties in Western Europe* 196 (Oxford University Press, 2003); Antonis Ellinas, *The Media and the Far Right in Western Europe: Playing the Nationalist Card* 36 (Cambridge University Press, 2010).

<sup>[8]</sup> Antonis Ellinas, *The Rise of Golden Dawn: The New Face of the Far Right in Greece*, *South European Society and Politics* 1, 6-7 (2013), <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13608746.2013.782838> (last visited Mar 28, 2013).

<sup>[9]</sup> Golden Dawn, Θέσεις: Ταυτότητα [Positions: Identity] (2012b) available online at <http://www.xryshaygh.com/index.php/kinima>

<sup>[10]</sup> See *ibid*.

<sup>[11]</sup> Golden Dawn, Positions: Political Positions (2012c) available online at <http://www.xryshaygh.com/index.php/kinima>

<sup>[12]</sup> See I. Kontiades & C. Anthopoulos, *Krise tou hellenikou politikou systematos?* (Ekdoseis Papazese, 2008); C. Simitris, *Democracy in Crisis?* (Polis Publications, 2007); X. Kontiades, *Deficient Democracy: State and Parties in Modern Greece* (Sideris, 2009); Ch. Kastanides, *Crisis and Reform of the Political System* (Livanis, 2009); Th. Veremis & H. Tsoukas, *The Anatomy of Crisis* (Skai Publications, Neo Faliro 2011).

<sup>[13]</sup> See Ch. Lyrantzis, *Political Parties in Post-Junta Greece: A case of 'Bureaucratic Clientelism'?*, 7 *West European Politics* (1984); 1987; M. Featherstone, *Global Culture. Nationalism, Globalization and Modernity* (M. Featherstone ed., Sage, 1990); D. Sotiropoulos, *Populism and Bureaucracy: The Case of Greece Under Pasok, 1981-1989* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1996); T.S. Pappas, *Making Party Democracy in Greece* (St. Martin's Press, 1999); A. Papakostas, *Why is There no Clientelism in Scandinavia? A Comparison of the Swedish and Greek Sequences*

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*of Development, in Clientelism, Interests and Democratic Representation: The European Experience in Historical and Comparative Perspective* (S. Piattoni ed., Cambridge University Press, 2001).

<sup>[14]</sup> Cas Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Wing Parties in Europe* 33-35 (Cambridge University Press, 2000).

<sup>[15]</sup> See Papasarakantopoulos, *supra* note 12, at 12-19.

<sup>[16]</sup> Roman Gerodimos, *Greece : Politics at the Crossroads*, 4 Political Insight 16, 16 (2013).

<sup>[17]</sup> See *ibid.*

<sup>[18]</sup> *ibid.* at 17-18.

<sup>[19]</sup> See Ellinas, *supra* note 47, at 14-5.

<sup>[20]</sup> George Kassimeris, *Greece: The Persistence of Political Terrorism*, 89 Int'l Aff. 131, 142 (2013).

<sup>[21]</sup> See Gerodimos, *supra* note 59, at 18.

[22] The rise of the Golden Dawn is not a natural consequence of the economic crisis, but a reflection of wider problems in Greek society

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## About the author:

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