

The Golden Dawn and the Extreme Right in Greece

Written by Despina Papadimitriou

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DESPINA PAPADIMITRIOU, MAR 5 2014

In the Greek national elections of May 2012, Golden Dawn (GD) received 6.97 per cent (441,018 votes) and in the June 2012 elections, secured 6.92 per cent (425,990 votes) and 18 seats. (Ellinas: 6, Psarras: 84-139, Georgiadou: 88). The significant parliamentary representation that GD, a Greek pro-Nazi party, characterized as party-militia,[1] managed to attain, has given rise to serious concerns both in Greece and abroad.[2]

Golden Dawn

The "People's League-Golden Dawn" was founded on February 14, 1983, by Nikolaos Michaloliakos who came out of the milieu of the anti-Semite Constantine Plevris and his "4th of August Party" (1965-1977, named after the date Ionnis Metaxas imposed dictatorship). In September 1984, Michaloliakos took over the leadership of the youth group of the "National Political Union" (EPEN), for a short time. This party demanded the release of the imprisoned protagonists of the 1967 military coup (Kapetanyannis: 203). *The People's League of Golden Dawn* was initially a magazine, (1980-1984, re-issued in February 1986) which was founded by adopting the paradigm of a national-socialist *cultural club* in a Greek version. In 1993 a daily journal under the same name was launched.

In 2004, GD suspended its political operations and founded the "Patriotic Alliance", when the party's number two, Antonios Androutsopoulos, referred to as Periandros, was brought to justice on account of three assassination attempts in 1998; he was sentenced to 21 years in prison reduced to 12 on appeal (Ellinas: 6, Psarras: 84-139, Georgiadou: 88). It recommenced activities as GD in 2007. Until then, the party had been on the margins of parliamentary politics and notorious only for anti-immigrant, anti-communist and anti-leftist violence. For example, in the European elections of 1999, while it joined forces with Plevris's "First Line", it received 0.75 per cent (Ellinas: 6). However, in 2007, the party decided to participate independently in the elections. Though it failed in the 2009 European and national elections, receiving 0.46 and 0.29 per cent respectively (Ellinas: 6), the dynamics of the complex and profound crisis in Greece was fertile ground for the rise in the GD party.

Greece has been facing a major debt crisis and a decline in its economy; the austerity measures have pushed the country into serious recession with devastating political and social repercussions. High unemployment and poverty, social anger against politicians and official corruption in the last three decades favoured the movement at odds with the political system and the populist rhetoric.

The Socio-Economic Conditions of Golden Dawn's Emergence

As Dinas, Georgiadou, Konstantinidis and Rori have shown, the 2010 municipal elections marked GD's first major electoral success, especially in Athens, where GD received 5.3 per cent of the vote (compared to the 0.29 per cent it received in the 2009 national elections). The leader of the party, Nikolaos Michaloliakos, was elected to the municipal council of the city. Elements such as the rapid growth of immigrant population since 2008, which settled particularly in the 2nd and 6th city districts, criminality and urban degradation were among the factors that intensified xenophobic attitudes (Dinas et al.: 2,6).

After the municipal elections, the GD mobilized with the aim of bringing the party and its militants closer to every district of Athens on a local basis by participating in local initiatives, standing up for "Greeks in danger", merging with

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some resident committees, keeping playgrounds and parks available for Greeks, distributing food to impoverished Greek citizens and attempting to influence schoolchildren. It was also through an “intensive neighbourhood-by-neighbourhood campaign” that Vlaams Block succeeded in “electorally exploiting demand” (De Decker et al, 2005: 163, cited in Dinas et al: 6).

On a European level, far-right politics present similarities with GD’s tactics and methods. In France, Jean-Marie Le Pen had managed to manipulate social protest in favour of his party; this kind of protest was rendered manifest either in the form of the old-style poujadism or as anxiety against immigration (Minkenberg: 9,14). He managed to infiltrate deep into society through grassroots organizations, professional associations, trade unions and other bodies. Front National accomplished the proliferation of its political discourse (Ellinas: 11).

A key concept of this discourse, that of *national preference* deriving from the principle of national sovereignty and linked to an organic conception of society, re-appears in the national-populist discourse of the People’s Orthodox Rally (LAOS), a Greek right-wing nationalist party founded in 2000.[3] Following its decision to support the conservative candidate in the 2010 municipal elections in Athens, LAOS lost its anti-system status by supporting the Greek bailout agreement and by participating in the coalition government of November 2011-May 2012 (Dinas et al: 3, Ellinas: 15). Likewise, the principle of national preference was advocated in Portugal by Partido Nacional Renovador (PNR), giving priority to the “native” population and safeguarding the ethno-cultural character of the country (Marchi: 133-4).

Becoming visible in the midst of the nationalist fervor over the so-called Macedonian issue during the early 1990s, GD is now active against immigrants, especially those coming from Asia, Africa and the Middle East. Evidence gathered by the Greek Ombudsman indicates various acts of violence committed by GD against socially weak people on account of their exclusion. Such acts are performed on the pretext of protecting public order and security (Psarras: 423). Taking a firm stand against the bailout agreements and the Memoranda, GD personifies frustration, social and political malaise. GD’s electorate is male-dominated, not highly-educated and rather young (Ellinas: 12-14, Georgiadou: 90-95).

Ideological Characteristics

Golden Dawn’s ideology embraces the following components: Militant nationalism, the exaltation of virility and racism (supremacy of the white race, anti-Semitism and denial of the Holocaust), the cult of the leader and the politics of violence against the nation’s purported enemies (socialists, communists, Jews, immigrants). While they do not accept the neo-Nazi designation, identifying themselves as patriots and nationalists, GD members embrace pro-Nazi opinions and attitudes (Psarras: 93, 250-1).

For them, a pertinent question arises: Was Christianity an enemy of Greek and European civilization? According to *Golden Dawn*, their monthly publication (20-12-1990), Nazi duty is to clear up the Aryanised Christianity of the slightest residue of Jewish sperm and orient it to the constant values of people’s community. As the writer of the article added, “*we have to reject the Old Testament and reveal the genuine Greek cultural identity [for centuries suffocating] under the layer of Jewish tradition*”.

Contrary to the leading tradition of the Greek far-right, Metaxas’s regime and the Dictatorship of the Colonels (1967-1974), conventional religiosity could not be attributed to GD, though Michaloliakos has recently declared that the church and the army are the nation’s pillars (Psarras: 218, 248). Party MP Ilias Kassidiaris has accepted the “military structure of the party” and “the Leader’s presence as guarantor of the movement’s unity”.

After the murder of the 34-year-old Greek musician Pavlos Fissas on September 18, 2013 by a member of GD who confessed to the crime, the Greek coalition government has adopted a firm stance towards GD. On the 28th of the same month the police arrested several members of GD, including the party’s leader and MPs on the charges of being involved in a criminal organization, according to the report of the prosecutors. Three of the arrested MPs were released under restraining orders due to the fact that the evidence was considered inadequate for their detention (Lialiouti 2013), whilst six MPs are still in jail.

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The Questions

Right-wing extremism is a problem that preoccupies most countries of Eastern, Western and Southern Europe. The success of the GD in Greece (third in opinion polls) – comparable to that of the Hungarian Jobbik which won almost 17 per cent of the vote in the 2010 national parliamentary elections (Bíró Nagy et al.: 229) – should not be analysed only in terms of electoral politics. The conjectural element (i.e. the present economic crisis) in the rise of extreme right-wing parties is undeniable. Attention should also be paid, however, to the cultural dimension of the phenomenon: the material and post-material values and patterns of thought that, as far as Greece is concerned, had changed considerably in the last few decades.

A sociological approach is equally needed in order to explore the developing racism against “foreigners” among the poor and the unprivileged as well as amongst the well-off. Historical culture is another key element, as the intellectual and cultural behaviour linked to discrimination, rejection, racism and heterophobia are to be found – mainly – in the “thought-processes that produce political thinking, in [different] historical instances” (Freeden: 5). As far as Greece is concerned, three such instances should be given their due weight in the process of the formation of the aforementioned tradition: the deep political divisions between royalists and liberals during and after WWI, the reign of terror in the 40s, and the exclusion of the Left in the 50s and the 60s (during the military dictatorship, 1967-74). The categorization of citizens in all three instances and the politics of fear and exclusion contributed to the formation of a certain political culture. In conclusion it should be noted that the political and social history of contemporary Greece is comprehensible in the context of both crucial events and the structures that are formed and establish mental attitudes and political traditions.

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[1] Vassiliki Georgiadou employed the term for this party at the paper ("Greek Politics in Crisis: Challenges to the Open Society"), presented in the one-party Conference organized by the Hellenic Observatory LSE and the Open Society European Policy Institute, Brussels (29-11-2013).

[2] See, inter alia, Mark Mazower, "Democracy itself is at stake in Southern Europe", *Financial Times*, 4-10-2012.

[3] On LAOS see Despina Papadimitriou, "Greece", D.J.Sagar (ed.), *Political Parties of the World*, 7th edition, John Harper Publishing, London 2009, pp. 242-247.

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