

CICERO FOUNDATION GREAT DEBATE PAPER

No. 15/05

June 2015

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Cicero Foundation Great Debate Paper No. 15/05

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The Greek ‘Golden Dawn’: Reasons behind the Extreme Right’s Revival in the Cradle of Democracy

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The fall of fascist regimes in the years following the end of the Second World War marked the delegitimization of right-wing extremism across Europe. Increasingly, the far right-wing parties that are successful in Europe are those who have been able to modernize their ideology, framing the debate in terms of civic principles such as democracy, citizenship and respect for the rule of law. These parties distance themselves from fascism, often reject the far right label and denounce violence. In Greece in particular fascist ideals have been unthinkable, least because of the memory of the Nazi invasion in the 1940s, and the atrocities and deprivation that followed, as well as the country’s own experience of military dictatorship in the 1960s and 1970s. And yet in May and June 2012, over 400.000 Greek citizens voted for a party that represents precisely those ideals that are so vilified in Greece. The Golden Dawn received seven per cent of the vote in May and 6.9 per cent in June, granting it 21 and 18 parliamentary seats out of 300 respectively. It managed to retain its support in the 2014 European Parliament Elections receiving 9.38 per cent of the vote, despite its association with a large number of violent acts, which resulted in the imprisonment of the majority of its MPs including the party leader in 2013/2014. While in the 2015 general elections support for the party dropped, the

Golden Dawn still managed to attract 6.28 per cent of the votes cast, occupying third place in the Greek Parliament with 17 seats.

A PARTY THAT MOST RESEMBLES FASCISM

The Golden Dawn is an extreme, ultra-nationalist and racist party. Among current far right-wing parties in Europe, it is the one that most resembles fascism, and in particular Nazism, in its outright espousal of National Socialism: the endorsement of what it terms the 'third biggest ideology in history', i.e. nationalism, combined with support for an all-powerful state premised on 'popular sovereignty'. The party's logo is the Greek meander, which is reminiscent of the Nazi swastika. Its guiding two-fold principles are blood and honour. The first is defined in racial terms and the second in moral terms as the supreme ethical value. This captures the essence of its Nazi ideology. Since its election, the Golden Dawn has been careful in its public espousal of the Hitlerite regime. Although in the past it has made declarations glorifying the 'enlightened leadership of Adolf Hitler', the party has also been quick to argue that Nazism is case-specific, i.e. the type of National Socialism as applied to Germany alone, therefore it is inappropriate to speak of a Greek variant of Nazism. However - albeit this rhetoric - the espousal of National Socialism can hardly be disassociated from Nazism on ideological grounds.

First, the party emphasises white supremacy and equates the state with ethnicity. Its ideology centres on the Greek nation, which it understands as an organic entity defined by ethnic identifiers. These identifiers are confined to biological and cultural elements such as bloodline, language, religion and community of birth, making the Greek nation an exclusive club to which membership is restricted. There is a clear line of delineation between members and outsiders. Greek status cannot be acquired; it is something one is born into. As such, racism informs the party policy agenda. The Golden Dawn is staunchly and indiscriminately anti-immigrant, emphasizing that there is no such thing as 'legal' immigration. During its electoral campaign in June 2012 many of its members declared that immigration can never be legal; the party manifesto promised that if elected the party would expel all

immigrants from Greece. In the same manifesto the party denied the granting of full political rights to any non-Greek -as defined by the biological features described above- on the grounds that granting Greek citizenship to non-natives will 'spoil' the continuity of the Greek nation.

Second, the Golden Dawn resembles fascism in terms of its rejection of communism and liberalism, which it describes as tyrannical. The Golden Dawn identifies middle class complacency, liberal democracy and communism as the 'enemies from within': the key sources of internal threat to the nation. This explains its anti-systemicness and rejection of substantive democracy. The party denies the 'far right' label, which it argues equates them with other 'traitor' far right parties that have accepted the path of parliamentary democracy. It opposes democracy on a number of grounds, for example that it cannot be applied in practice; that it was not actually approved by the ancient Greeks; and that it gives power to any lay man who may not endorse nationalist ideals. Third, the party is a militant organisation defined by violence, discipline and ultimate respect for the leader to the extent that party members are required to stand and salute upon the leader's arrival. Its members define themselves as street soldiers. Some, including its leader, have authored monographs, which tend to glorify violence.

WHY DID THE 'GOLDEN DAWN' EMERGE?

What has facilitated the rise of an extreme, ultranationalist party such as the Golden Dawn in a country that has experienced Nazi invasion and a military dictatorship? The 2012 national elections were characterised by voter de-alignment and disillusionment with mainstream parties, which resulted in the fragmentation of the party system and the rise of small anti-establishment parties of both the right and the left. An analysis of the electoral results indicates that support for the Golden Dawn is an attitudinal phenomenon deriving from people's stance on the political system in general: a protest vote against the status quo and disillusionment with governing parties. It also indicates, however, that those voters more likely to opt for

the Golden Dawn are ones with right-wing socially conservative and authoritarian ideas.

Why has the Golden Dawn been most successful among these types of voters and what has it done to maximize its support? The obvious answer is economic crisis; or rather the significant political and economic dimensions of this crisis. The success of the Golden Dawn must be understood as dependent on the extent to which it was able to propound plausible solutions to the three sets of crises - economic, political and ideological - that befell Greece and culminated in an overall crisis of democracy to which the Golden Dawn offered a nationalist solution.

THE GREEK CRISIS AS A LEGITIMATION CRISIS OF THE GREEK STATE

With the eruption of the Eurozone crisis, Greece plunged into deep recession, threatening to destabilise the whole euro area. Austerity measures increased taxation, targeting income tax, VAT and property taxes. VAT rose from 19 per cent to 23 per cent. The tax-free threshold for income was lowered significantly. Many sectors of the population suffered, especially the middle class. Homeowners were targeted to pay large sums in the form of property tax and many were unable to do so losing their homes. Salaries, especially public sector salaries and pensions were significantly reduced, with some reductions as high as 40 or 50 per cent. The Greek government abolished the two extra monthly salaries per annum, known as the '13th and 14th' salaries, which was seen as a controversial measure. Public investment was cut and subsidies for local government were reduced. Welfare spending, including education, health, and benefits were also targeted. This was accompanied by increasing levels of unemployment. The rise of total unemployment between 2009 and the 2013 is stark, increasing from 9.6 per cent in 2009 to 17.9 in 2011 and 27.5 in 2013. Youth unemployment (those under 25) rose from 25.7 in 2009 to 44.7 in 2011 and 58.3 in 2013.

Greece's economic deficiencies, including its inability to refinance its high public debt and manage its worsening deficit, culminated to a political crisis. As the crisis

progressed, Greek citizens increasingly lost their trust in the system and progressively perceived the state as ineffective. They saw the government as highly unstable; its effectiveness to provide public services limited; its ability to regulate the private sector constrained; the justice system unable to enforce law and order and the state as partial and controlled by private interests. The role of the state is key here. If we understand the state as part of a social contract, the delivery of its collective goods, i.e. services and redistribution, are a key part of this contract. What happened to the Greek economy had significant implications for the strength of Greece's democratic institutions and its state capacity. As the state became increasingly perceived as unable to limit the socio-economic impact of the crisis on individual citizens, the legitimacy of the system declined. The sovereign debt crisis exposed the state's inability to deliver on the social contract, thus undermining the legitimacy of the system. What was discredited was not only the ability of the government to formulate sound economic policy, or the ability of a particular political party to put forward a better policy agenda. Rather the very premise of the system of the post-dictatorship era was shown as ineffective and illegitimate. The Golden Dawn's nationalist solution appeared a viable alternative at a time when Greece faced economic, political and ideological crises not despite but precisely because of putting forward an anti-systemic agenda.

NATION-STATISM AND VIOLENCE AGAINST 'OUTSIDERS'

This agenda is premised on a fascist rhetoric. The Golden Dawn is a fascist group characterised by the principles of nationalism, statism, paramilitarism, transcendence and cleansing. As such, the Golden Dawn's 'nationalist solution' must be understood within the framework of fascist political myths (Griffin 1991), and more specifically the twin myths of social decadence and palingenesis. The party's emphasis on the social decadence myth is a characteristic the party shares with fascist movements and forms the starting point- and legitimation- of the party's nation-statism, paramilitarism, transcendence and cleansing. The party lauds "resistance," "will," "movement," "collective action," "the masses," and the dialectic of "progress" through "struggle," "force," and "violence." This dialectic is

characterized by progress instigated by the Golden Dawn, not in elitist terms, but rather as the embodiment of the popular will of the people to end the current rotten system and substitute it with the authentic rule of the people through a nationalist movement from below.

The Golden Dawn emphasizes resistance against pluralism and democratic rule as these are seen as a threat to national sovereignty, unity and authentic popular supremacy. The party's proposed populist nation-statism is seen as the only type of authentic democratic rule that could protect the sovereignty of the Greek nation and embody the collective will of the people. Violence through paramilitary means is justified so long as it protects this regime. In this way the Golden Dawn seeks to transcend social cleavages, which are seen as artificial divisions created by liberal democracy and bringing about social decay. It is essential to cleanse the nation from all elements that bring about this social degeneration. The party emphasizes the divine duty to physically eliminate enemies and the necessity of sacrifice for this ultimate goal. Purging is directed to those outsiders and insiders that seek to undermine the purity of the Greek nation engendering its decline.

PALINGENESIS: THE COMING GREEK 'REBIRTH'

The fascist myth of palingenetic ultra-nationalism constitutes the second key ideological premise underpinning the party's rhetoric and programmatic agenda. The solution to social decadence is a 'phoenix-like' national rebirth from the ashes of the old degenerate order. The Golden Dawn sees itself as a crusader with a 'unique mission, because its members do not just belong to any Nation, but rather to the Great Greek Nation which created civilization, which built two world empires and which was reborn like the mythic phoenix from its own ashes with the blood of its Fighters in 1821'. This 'phoenix-like' national rebirth also constitutes the Golden Dawn's vision for contemporary Greece. The party's overall vision is the re-birth of the Greek nation through a populist, purifying trans-class movement. The Golden Dawn portrays Greeks as a people chosen by God. As such, restoration of past glory is presented as a right of birth and is at the core of the party's palingenetic appeal.

Greeks are distinct from all outsiders; they are superior to all outsiders; they have a special destiny to lead Western civilization; and only the Golden Dawn can lead them to fulfil their destiny. This is the Golden Dawn's special calling.

Together with the twin fascist myth of social decadence, this constitutes the Golden Dawn's nationalist solution to the Greek crisis. This solution promises an escape from the current decadent system and all its ills by proposing an alternative path for Greece. In this alternative path, Greece's past glory has been formally restored by a popular movement from below, embodied by the Golden Dawn and its leader. Only Greek nationalists inhabit this alternative ideal Greece. There are no longer any societal divisions, as these have been transcended and substituted by the singular will of the people. Internal and external enemies have been cleansed and the nation has been purified. In this society there is no atomization, and no individual outside nationalism. The nation has been reborn from its ashes and has reached the Promised Land, where there is no disillusionment, no dissatisfaction, no crisis, no corruption and no societal decay.

HOW TO DEAL WITH 'GOLDEN DAWN'?

The rise of the Golden Dawn and its popular endorsement in the Greek political system raises a number of questions regarding the nature of democratic politics. The ability of the party to operate within the confines of parliamentary politics significantly impacted on Greek society, both directly and indirectly. Beyond shifting the policy agenda and legitimizing exclusionary and conservative policies, it also revealed the deeply ingrained intolerance and propensity towards violence especially in a society ridden by crisis. One of the potential remedies for the Golden Dawn phenomenon discussed in Greece included the Constitutional outlawing of the party especially after the arrest of its MPs. However, the danger of such a solution may be that it is at best temporary and at worse could have the reverse effect of increasing the party's support. A longer standing solution should include longer term policies leading towards the cultivation of a more tolerant political culture that accepts the rights of groups with whom one disagrees, to freely and peacefully

express their opinion and compete for power. This can only be facilitated by educational reform and civic engagement.

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