



Rising Golden Dawn: Inside Greece's Neo-Nazi Party

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Golden Dawn, a Greek Neo-Fascist party, has gradually enjoyed greater success in Greek and European parliamentary elections. What are the drivers behind this development?

The Greek Golden Dawn, a violent neo-Nazi party, has remained in the margins of the Greek political system for most of its political life. However, within the context of the emerging economic crisis both in Europe and in Greece, the party marked an electoral breakthrough in [May](#) and [June 2012](#), receiving 7 per cent of the vote in May and 6.9 per cent in June, translating into 21 and 18 parliamentary seats out of 300 respectively. As the economic crisis unfolded, and societal upheaval in Greece became reinforced by the emerging migration crisis, the party retained its support in the [2014 European Parliament Elections](#) receiving 9.38 per cent of the vote; and in the January and September 2015 general elections, when it retained third place in the party system with 6.28 and 6.99 per cent of the vote respectively.

The ideology of Golden Dawn

The Golden Dawn is unlike all other parties in the Greek parliament; and most other far right parties in Europe. While the party itself rejects the fascist label, it nonetheless espouses all core fascist- and more specifically Nazi- principles. In our [book](#), we show the party rejects liberalism and socialism and endorses what it terms the 'third biggest ideology in history', i.e. nationalism, combined with support for an all-powerful state premised on 'popular sovereignty'. In its manifesto the party states that being a member of the Golden Dawn entails the acceptance of the following principles: the establishment of the state in accordance to nationalism; the moral obligations that derive from this ideology

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including the rejection of any authority that perpetuates societal decline; the acceptance of nationalism as the only authentic revolution; the establishment of the popular state in which there are no inequalities on the basis of wealth; racial supremacy and more specifically the belief in the continuation of the 'Greek race' from antiquity to the modern day; the idea that the state must correspond and be subservient to the nation/race; and the nationalization of all institutions.

The fascist myth of palingenetic ultra-nationalism constitutes a key ideological premise underpinning the party's discourse. The ideology of the Golden Dawn may indeed be categorised within the 'ethnic nationalism' variant, emphasising blood, genealogy and the perennial nature of the Greek nation. The party emphasises ties with ancient Greece, past wars, imperial experience during the Ottoman years and invasion in the 1940s. In this context, the party makes frequent references to ancient Greece, emphasising the heroic traits of those belonging to the Greek nation. Historical figures, whether heroes of ancient Greece, Byzantium, the Greek War of Independence, the Second World War or Cyprus are glorified for their heroism, bravery and sacrifice. By referring to a very large array of officially recognised historical events, personalities and national identity traits and placing them within the ethnic election framework, the Golden Dawn successfully integrates them into its ultra-nationalist palingenetic ideology.

The Golden Dawn seeks 'catharsis'. The party's key goal is to eliminate all political divisions and cleanse the nation from outsiders. Communists are identified as those internationalists that seek the annihilation of the Greek nation. Contributing to this ethnocide are also Greece's external enemies, which include all foreigners who according to the Golden Dawn contribute to

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the moral and cultural decay of Greece, for example people of Jewish origin and all immigrants.

Militarism hence is the key to both the Golden Dawn's ideology and organizational structures. The army is the ultimate value, they claim. A value that encloses within it 'blood, struggle and sacrifice'. The party's members see themselves as 'street soldiers' fighting for the nationalist cause. This places violence at the heart of Golden Dawn's activities and illustrates their distinctive view of democracy as a bourgeois construct only to be used as a means for achieving their ultimate goal: its abolition, as its leader Nikolaos Michaloliakos claims. It also explains the link between Golden Dawn members and army officials, as well as the organization of 'paramilitary orders' or 'battalions'.

Therefore the party should be understood as neo-Nazi, not because of its past use of Nazi paraphernalia, but rather because its ideology and organizational structures fulfil the criteria of what constitutes a neo-Nazi group. Its association with a large number of violent acts resulted in the imprisonment of the majority of its MPs including the party leader in 2013/2014. 70 defendants, which include the party leader and the party's MPs, went on trial in Spring 2015 on charges including murder, grievous bodily harm and sustaining a criminal organization. The trial remains on-going.

Accounting for the rise of Golden Dawn

How may we explain the rise and sustained support for the Golden Dawn? The Golden Dawn's electoral fortunes have coincided with both the economic and migration crises that have affected Europe as a whole. For example, in 2012 during the peak of Greece's economic crisis, [the country's unemployment](#) was at 24.5 per cent with youth unemployment at 55.3 per cent. In 2013 these

figures increased to 27.5 and 58.3 respectively. The **government deficit** was -8.6, which increased in 2013 to -12.1. In addition, Greece experienced the bulk of the migration crisis as the entry point for a high number of refugees who travel from Turkey to the islands of Kos, Chios, Lesbos and Samos. For example, **an estimated number** of 856.723 refugees arrived by sea in 2015 and 169.459 in 2016. It would make sense to seek causal links between the economic and migration crises on the one hand, and the rise of the Golden Dawn on the other. However, the adoption of a comparative logic suggests that this argument does not hold when subjected to empirical scrutiny. Other European countries that were also severely affected by the Eurozone and/or migration crises have not experienced a comparable rise in support for the far right. For example, **Spain's unemployment levels** are second in the EU after Greece with 24.8 per cent in 2012 and 26.1 per cent in 2013. Youth unemployment in Spain is also very high at 52.9 per cent in 2012 and 55.5 in 2013. Portugal's **somewhat lower unemployment** rates at 15.8 per cent in 2012 and 16.4 per cent in 2013 are still above the EU average. The same goes for the country's **youth unemployment rates** at 37.9 per cent in 2012 and 38.1 in 2013.

We posit an alternative explanation that takes into account the broader implications of the crises of Greek society. We understand the rise of the Golden Dawn as a response to a perceived **breach of the social contract** in Greece. Therefore, we see this rise not as question of *intensity* of economic and/ or migration crisis, but rather as a question of the *nature* of the crisis, i.e. economic and/migration versus overall crisis of democratic representation. Extreme right parties such as the Golden Dawn are more likely to experience an increase in their support when a societal crisis culminates into an overall crisis of democratic representation. This is likely to occur when severe issues of

governability impact upon the ability of the state to fulfil its social contract obligations. The perceived inability of the state to mediate the effects of the crisis and to deliver services based on the redistribution of the collective goods of the state. When state capacity is limited or perceived to be limited, then the result is the delegitimization of the party system as a whole. This is because the system is perceived as incapable to address the crisis and mediate its socioeconomic effects. This breach of the social contract is accompanied by declining levels of trust in state institutions, resulting in party system collapse.

Conclusion

If we are right, then the Golden Dawn is a specific symptom of a broader institutional pathology. Therefore in order to contain this phenomenon, political actors should focus on institutional reform in order to restore the domestic social contract and reintegrate key social groups back into the political mainstream. More specifically:

1. Empower the middle class: because the middle class is key to both economic prosperity and democratic stability. Weak democratic institutions and widespread corruption have resulted in the weakening of the middle ground and this is what allows extremist groups to co-opt middle-class voters. Unless we address this institutional pathology at its core, extremism will keep recurring.
2. Welfare reform: because the appropriation of key social groups into the mainstream depends on social security. The greater the insecurity, and the broader the populace it affects, the greater the potential of extremist elements to co-opt these social groups that would otherwise support mainstream alternatives.

3. Strengthen civil society institutions: Because civil society fosters tolerance. Greek civil Society is weak at all levels: weak structure, limited impact and limited membership. There is a wider sentiment of public distrust towards this type of organisations in Greece because of the long tradition of corruption and clientelistic relations that prevail.
4. Reform the education system: Because education is a key means of socialisation that institutionalises political culture. The type of socialisation that occurs from an early age at the school level is the one that becomes most embedded. And, because people of a younger age are more easily moulded into violence and extremism, they tend to occupy a large portion of far right party membership. As long as the Greek education system promotes exclusion and vilifies the other through official textbooks, it will continue to offer opportunities for right-wing extremism.

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