



## Analysis

### Neo-nazis enter the Greek Parliament

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The well known Professor of contemporary history Mark Mazower, referring in his book *Dark Continent* to the definition of the significance of Europe, states: "At the end, in the core of this story stands the issue of values - those which pushed people to act, which created and transformed the institutions, which guided the policies of the states and sustained the communities, the families and the individuals", in order to submit that the twentieth century of Europe is "the history of their conflict", i.e. a conflict between value systems.

It seems that a similar conflict is taking place again under new terms in the "new Europe" of globalised late modernity. Europe stands at crossroads. The welfare state is gradually transformed into a, according to L. Waquant, "warfare state" where rights and liberties are seriously threatened and curtailed; where xenophobia and nationalism influence the collective social consciousness and state policies. So, the defence of the core cultural and political European values of democracy, pluralism, tolerance, transparency, justice for the weak are once more becoming an urgent duty and priority. The recent social and political developments in Greece could be an indicative example.

#### **"Golden Dawn": The profile**

In Greece's recent twin elections of 6 May and 12 June 2012, amidst an unprecedented financial and social crisis, the "Chryssi Avgi" organisation, which means "Golden Dawn", won about 7% of the vote in both instances.

Golden Dawn was founded in 1993 by Nick Michaloliakos, who was arrested in 1978 as a member of another ultra-right organisation and convicted of possessing firearms and explosives. The "Golden Dawn" organisation believes in the superiority of the Greek nation and the white "race", is hostile to immigrants and the homosexuals, Marxism and multiculturalism, and has an anti-Semitic ideology that defends the activities of the paramilitaries who collaborated with the German Army during the Occupation. Although its leadership does not describe the organisation as fascist or neo-nazi, they salute in a way

that is reminiscent of Hitler, cite Rudolf Hess as a “hero” in their journal, participate in gatherings of far right groups from all over Europe and frequently visit Berlin where they assemble to commemorate the anniversary of Hitler’s defeat.

Nevertheless, this racist and marginalised political group, which at the 2009 national election received only 0.3 percent of the vote, two weeks ago won almost 7% of the electorate’s votes and is now represented in the Greek Parliament with 19 seats.

This phenomenon calls for an explanation, particularly because Greece is a country with strong anti-fascist and democratic traditions. Golden Dawn’s electoral success is likely to have serious ramifications for Greek society as existing social parameters spiral out of control.

### **The creation of a “moral panic”**

Over the last five to six years, Greece has faced a growing wave of irregular immigration, coming mainly from Muslim countries. In Spain and Italy tough immigration policies and agreements to combat illegal immigration with neighbouring African countries have changed the direction of African immigration flows towards Greece. At the same time, flows from Asia and the Middle East (mainly Pakistan, Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Iraq) have also increased. In 2010, 132,524 people were arrested for “illegal entry and stay” in Greece, compared to 95,239 arrests in 2006. In 2010 90% of all detentions for unauthorised entry in the European Union took place in Greece, while the percentage for 2008 was only 50%.

These developments, together with the implementation of the Dublin II regulation which provides for the processing of asylum applications in the EU country of initial entry and has led to migrants from other EU member-countries being returned to Greece, have transformed Greece into a warehouse for irregular migrants. At the same time, the deep recession has dramatically increased difficulties in the administration of this complex phenomenon and created a humanitarian crisis. This situation has created a “moral panic.”

A moral panic is a phenomenon where a social behaviour or a social group is, under certain circumstances, perceived as threatening to the community. Society reacts as it would in the case of a physical disaster that must be avoided at all costs. For the creation of a social moral panic certain stages are necessary which interact in the form of a “spiral.” In this particular case, we can describe it as follows:

- Migrants arrive in the context of a deep recession
- Increased numbers of homeless, impoverished and unemployed people, lacking homes and social networks, occupy public spaces. This fuels public anxiety
- Fears concerning public health and petty criminality create insecurity and disquiet
- The racist dimension emerges as negative stereotypes (i.e. that Muslims do not want to integrate) and conspiracy theories (concerning the “Islamisation” of the country) appear. These xenophobic concepts are reinforced and encouraged in the popular media
- This feeds back to the first stage of the spiral.

## **The “legitimation” of racist violence**

In this context, violent acts committed by Golden Dawn were gradually accepted by segments of the population, especially in urban centres where large concentrations of migrants created discontent in everyday interactions. From its establishment, Golden Dawn praised and practiced violence, especially of a racist nature. They have claimed that the “real” violence is not their racist attacks which, in their words, “is the expression of the anger and indignation of people”, but “the flooding of the country by illegal immigrants of every race, nation and religion, who kill, rape, rob, are trafficking drugs and prostitutes, and bring diseases.” At their rallies in various cities, the dominant slogan is “Against all.” They recruit youngsters, school students and thugs to chase immigrants and homosexuals and seize poor neighbourhoods from immigrants, especially Asians and Africans. Informal “militias” have been formed in all of the major cities which systematically threaten and attack immigrants, even store-owners, whom they characterise as “human garbage.” Golden Dawn members upload videos of their attacks on immigrants, homosexuals and members of anti-racist groups to Youtube.

There is also strong evidence that members of the police force, especially lower ranking officers, are supportive of Golden Dawn. In November 2011, for example, following organised violence against immigrants in the areas of Thebes, Egaleo and Renti police did not even collect fingerprints from the weapons used in the attacks. In fact, in one case, they arrested some of the victims because they did not have legal documents. Most racist attacks are not even recorded. In recent elections, according to a recent analysis of the vote, one out of two police officers in Athens voted for Golden Dawn.

## **Other important parameters**

However, the substance of the issue is not only the exploitation of a moral panic against the presence of immigrants. If we do not examine the reasons that led hundreds of thousands of Greek citizens to vote for Golden Dawn, we will not be able to prevent Greece from becoming a European country where fascism exists in its raw undiluted form. While concerns over immigration played an important role, nationwide results show that Golden Dawn received high percentages of votes not only in rundown areas of big urban centres. It seems that because of hard austerity measures, which have seen the violent impoverishment of the lower-middle classes and the despair of the poor and the young, people have turned to Golden Dawn across the country, even in areas where the number of immigrants is insignificant or social tensions are not present. Golden Dawn’s 7% return of the vote comes from a wide range of sources: members of hard-core fascist and neo-nazi groups, disappointed conservative voters who usually support LAOS and New Democracy which backed the government’s “austerity” programme and most importantly, new voters, young workers, the unemployed and new graduates. In this last category Golden Dawn attained 12-13% of the vote. This shift in voting patterns is linked to the growing delegitimation of major social institutions, such as the traditional political parties and Parliament itself, universities and academics, intellectuals, the mainstream mass media, and even trust in the justice system. Golden Dawn is perceived as an anti-systemic “extreme” force that will punish the corrupt political system responsible for Greece’s current predicament.

Is it false consciousness? Historical ignorance? Political naivety? The vertigo of the fiscal crisis and the social dislocation? Plain anger and despair? Maybe all of these and more. However, the phenomenon must be seen and faced as an interactive social process rather than an isolated episode or even an “historical accident.” It is definitely a nasty and dangerous reality which must be tackled in political and ideological terms with concrete social and economic policies both in Greece and in Europe.

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