

Golden Dawn's 'nationalist solution': explaining the rise of the far-right in Greece

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The emergence of Golden Dawn has been one of the key developments in Greek party politics since the beginning of the financial crisis. [Sofia Vasilopoulou](#) and [Daphne Halikiopoulou](#) assess the rise of the party, noting that Golden Dawn's success has been based on its ability to promote a nationalist solution to the economic, political and ideological crises that have occurred in Greece. They argue, however, that simply outlawing the party could prove self-defeating, and that a better strategy would be to focus on educational reform and civic engagement as a way to counter divisive narratives.



The fall of fascist regimes in the years following the end of the Second World War marked the delegitimisation of right-wing extremism across Europe. Increasingly, the far-right parties which are successful in Europe are those that have been able to modernise 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, not 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](#) (Χρυσή Αυγή) 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, Golden Dawn still managed to attract 6.28 per cent of the votes cast, occupying third place in the Greek Parliament with 17 seats.

Explaining the rise of the far-right in Greece

Golden Dawn is an extreme, ultra-nationalist and racist party. Among current far-right 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'. What has facilitated the rise of an extreme, ultranationalist party such as Golden Dawn in a country that has experienced Nazi invasion and a military dictatorship?

In our new book, *[The Golden Dawn's Nationalist Solution: Explaining the rise of the far right in Greece](#)* we seek to explain the rise of Golden Dawn by understanding the party itself, its ideology, strategy and voting base. We propose an explanation that, taking into account complex economic and political dynamics, focuses on a party strategic response to societal crisis. Starting from the premise that the economic crisis that Greece experienced was all-encompassing, with significant political and ideological implications, we term the Greek crisis as an overall crisis of democracy and the nation- state.

We understand the rise of Golden Dawn within the context of high levels of disillusionment, dissatisfaction with democracy and electoral volatility. Within this context, we examine Golden Dawn's strategic response to the crisis in terms of the offering of a 'nationalist solution' through the employment of two fascist myths in its discourse: the myth

of social decadence and the myth of national rebirth. It is through these two myths that Golden Dawn promises the dispossessed an escape from their social, economic and overall human desolation.

Golden Dawn rose in Greece at a time of severe economic crisis resulting in recession, high rates of government deficit as a percentage of GDP, high levels of unemployment and stern austerity measures. It makes sense to seek causal links between the Eurozone crisis and the rise of Golden Dawn. However, it would be misguided to assume that people's grievances automatically translate into far-right party mobilisation. Other European countries that were also severely affected by the Eurozone crisis, including Portugal, Ireland, Cyprus, Spain and Italy, did not experience a comparable rise in support for the far-right.

Looking to supply, the crisis in Greece also resulted in the fragmentation of the party system, allowing small parties to enter the political scene. However it is also misguided to assume that political opportunities will automatically lead to the rise of far-right parties. While in some of the most severely affected countries noted above the main parties were weakened, allowing for smaller parties to enter the system, it was far-left parties that benefited from this. Examples include [Podemos](#) in Spain and [Sinn Féin](#) in Ireland.

Taking party discourse into account, we could argue that Golden Dawn has been successful because of the rhetoric it puts forward. However, [National Popular Front \(ELAM\)](#), Golden Dawn's sister party in crisis-ridden Cyprus, which has adopted a similar discourse, has not enjoyed similar levels of success. Therefore, neither demand nor supply-side explanations in themselves fully capture the dynamics of far-right party support in Greece.

The success of Golden Dawn must be understood precisely within this context: as dependent on the extent to which it was able to propose 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 Golden Dawn offered a nationalist solution. This can be shown by drawing upon the theories of fascism developed by authors such as [Michael Mann](#) and [Roger Griffin](#).

We argue that the nature of the Greek crisis and the fact that its economic, political and ideological dimensions challenged the Greek nation-state at its core, opened up a political opportunity for Golden Dawn to present itself as the saviour of the nation and defender of the national mission. Like fascist movements of the past, Golden Dawn puts forward 'a "[palingenetic myth](#)" of populist ultra-nationalism, seeking a nation rising Phoenix-like from the ashes of an old decadent social order'.

In line with our argument, which focuses on the interaction between demand and supply-side dynamics, we have also combined quantitative analysis of voting behaviour with qualitative analysis of party documents in order to examine the rise of Golden Dawn. Regarding voting behaviour, we examined individual-level data from the Hellenic Panel Component of the Voter Study of the European Election Study 2014. In our qualitative analysis, we have examined over 1,500 Golden Dawn online materials uploaded on the Golden Dawn website between April 2012 and September 2014 under the sections of current affairs, ideological texts, history and civilisation.

The rise of 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 legitimising exclusionary and conservative policies, it also revealed the deeply ingrained intolerance and propensity toward violence, especially in a society ridden by crisis.

One of the potential remedies for the Golden Dawn phenomenon discussed in Greece has been the Constitutional outlawing of the party following the arrest of its MPs. However, the danger of such a solution may be that it is at best temporary and at worst could have the opposite of the intended effect by increasing the party's support. A lasting solution should include longer term policies leading toward 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.

This article draws on material from the authors' book, *The Golden Dawn's Nationalist Solution: Explaining the rise of the far right in Greece* (Palgrave, 2015)

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