Golden Dawn's consolidation and its reluctant prosecution

Marietta Simegiatou

With its leaders in prison, Golden Dawn still managed to consolidate its electoral base. Where did the party come from and what are the latest developments?

Golden Dawn traces its roots back to the 1980s, though it was much less popular at the time, counting just a few members. It was first introduced as a magazine on nationalist issues and Nazi propaganda in December 1980. Its founder, Nikos Michaloliakos, inspired by his mentor, the dictator Papadopoulos, wanted to create an extremist closed-type organization that he would be able to control better. Although the group was initially opposed to any meddling in politics, purporting to be "much too pure for this dirty business" – unlike its peers of the time, such as National Political Union (EPEN) – its leader had been planning to put the group's power to the test by running in elections as early as 1983. It was not until the 1990s that Golden Dawn became a political party. Its popular base remained minimal, however.

Then came the new millennium and Greece's full integration into the Eurozone, with the adoption of the common currency and the gradual concession of external border control to supranational authorities. The start of the decade was marked by the war on terror and two consecutive wars in the Middle East – hence, billions of displaced persons and refugees. The lack of any planning to host the large migrant flows and the prevailing logic that immigrants were to be 'pushed back', whether it would be pushing them back to Greece under Dublin regulations or back to their countries of origin, generated feelings of 'unwantedness' and hostility against foreigners.

As a typical extreme-right party, Golden Dawn effectively parallels the nation with the state and ethnicity with citizenship. The establishment of an ethnically pure state, more than being a goal in itself, will also save the nation from national decadence. In this context, there has been a coordinated effort to highlight our 'sense of patriotism', our sense of being different to other cultures, with the pretext of safeguarding our 'national identity' – by asserting our 'whiteness', as opposed to Africa, or the Middle East, for instance. Xenophobia became a tool to prevent Greeks from losing their identity. This is an imposed fear considering that Greek people, rather than being xenophobic, have always been open and the first to assimilate imported lifestyles and – needless to say – were pioneers in spreading out their own culture and ethics.

Having always been on the crossroads of three continents, Greece would also have to assert its European identity, by presenting more similarities with its European or world partners than its neighboring Arab or African countries. Golden Dawn was given fertile ground to promote its anti-human ideology for the sake of 'belonging' and 'identifying' with the vision of a united Europe, with a consistent policy against external and internal threats.

Powered by the growing indignation against austerity and impoverishment, as well as by the hostility against the growing number of 'strangers', the Nazi party was able to turn its pariah status into an emblem of political purity and a desire for radical transformation of Greek politics. In the municipal elections of 2010, Golden Dawn managed to win 5% of the vote and one seat in the municipal council, while in the 2012 parliamentary elections, the party jumped to almost 7% and 18 seats in parliament. Surprises in the electoral result also included the villages of Distomo and Kalavryta (burnt to ashes by the Nazis), where the party doubled its votes from 2010 to 2012, evidencing the success of the shift in their

propaganda from the image of Hitler to that of ‘true patriots’.

Rising street power

Golden Dawn’s covert agenda has always been domination over the streets by holding pogroms. In this context, the Nazi group spread its local offices in many low-income and heavily populated neighborhoods. It was free to launch organized and planned attacks against immigrants, homosexuals and ideological opponents, as though unilaterally ‘legitimized’ to do so, to ‘keep our race pure‘. Actions included open-air fresh markets and distribution of food for Greeks only, as well as other discriminatory street events. All of this was tolerated, if not backed, by the state, the police and the mainstream media.

Electoral results reflect the support the Nazi party enjoys among the police and the armed forces, considering that half the police and the army voted for Golden Dawn. Infiltration into soccer clubs to attract new members has also been standard practice. Furthermore, recent allegations about sponsorship by V. Marinakis, a shipping magnate, director of the soccer team Olympiakos and now a member of the Piraeus city council, appear to be well-founded.

In the general turmoil of the crisis, Golden Dawn’s street apparatus was called into action to virtually eliminate the “enemy.” On January 17, 2013, 29-year-old Christos Stergiopoulos and 25-year-old Dionysis Liakopoulos, riding a motorcycle and armed with butterfly knifes, attacked and killed the Pakistani Sahzat Lukman in cold blood as he was riding his bike. He was not the first. At the time, the Network for Registering Incidents of Racist Violence had recordedmore than 200 attacks against immigrants and had highlighted the need to take steps against organized groups of racist violence. The two perpetrators confessed immediately after their arrest, and the search of their houses revealed

Golden Dawn election material and weaponry that would suit an ‘assault squadron’. Despite these facts, the police did not investigate the defenders’ links to Golden Dawn or any racist motive behind the killing, reducing the incident to a mere fight.

In July 2013, a Golden Dawn squadron of 100 people – most of them members of the offices in Piraeus and Nikaia – riding on 50 motorcycles attacked the free social space ‘Synergeio’ (Garage) in Ilioupolis, Athens, while an English class was being given to minors. After wrecking up the space, they heavily beat up the one person they could get their hands on, dragging him to the street in front of the eyes of witnesses. It was a sustained attack against a social space, whose very core is anti-fascism and anti-authoritarianism, launched by motorcyclists wearing Golden Dawn insignia, flying the flag of Golden Dawn and screaming nationalist slogans. The stormtroopers were led by Members of Parliament I. Lagos and N. Michos, as revealed by cell phone communications and by the presence of Lagos’ car (which was provided to him by Parliament) at the attack. Police motorcycles were seen next to the Nazis, watching over the attack.

The assassination of Pavlos Fyssas

On September 18, 2013, the ultra-nationalist party’s assault squadrons went too far: they chased down and stabbed activist, rapper and anti-fascist Pavlos Fyssas, a.k.a. Killah P, who was left to bleed to death on the pavement. They did this in the middle of a central street in one of the southern working-class districts of Athens, Keratsini, allegedly over remarks made by the rapper and his friends in a cafeteria that were overheard by Golden Dawn members, who then called in their thugs in a matter of minutes. Police was once again present and did nothing to prevent the assassination, but arrested the murderer, G. Roupakias, after pressure from passers-by and after he was recognized by the victim himself before he died.

The anti-fascist response was immediate: various demonstrations in Athens, Thessaloniki, Lesbos, Patras, Larissa and Komotini were called on the next day – all with a very high turnout – which were faced with the usual police repression and involved numerous arrests. Two days later, the anti-authoritarians' and anarchists' call for a common assembly in the Polytechnic School was attended by left-wingers, autonomous anti-fascists and local groups alike. Overcoming differences in beliefs and ways of action, a series of common assemblies were held among these varying forces that culminated in a big demonstration to close down the offices of the Nazi organization on September 25, 2013. Twenty thousand people marched in the streets of Athens to the offices of Golden Dawn and back, undaunted by the stun grenades and teargas of the police, who were waiting just in front of the Nazi headquarters. A few days later, the government would arrest Golden Dawn leader Nikos Michaloliakos and MPs Kasidiaris, Lagos, Panagiotaros and Michos in an operation that had – unsurprisingly – been kept secret from the press for days.

It is worth noting that the anti-fascist response was not organized from scratch. To the contrary, the anti-fascist movement had the impetus necessary to unleash all the forces of anti-authoritarians, anarchists, autonomists and other anti-fascists that throughout every phase in Greek history have been strong in their actions to eradicate any shred of fascism. That is why the anti-fascist movement never stopped. The assemblies following the events of Pavlos Fyssas' assassination led to numerous other direct actions and a European Anti-fascist Meeting that was held in Athens at the School of Fine Arts in April 2014. The three-day meeting gathered over 30 different anti-fascist groups from 20 European countries, very keen to share their experience and exchange modes of action in the various open workshops and assemblies held.

Moreover, the Athens area of Agios Panteleimonas, once a lair of Golden Dawn, has now been enriched with a new anti-fascist, anti-authoritarian, anarchist free social space called Distomo to commemorate the massacres by the Nazis during WWII. The anti-fascist counter-demonstration against the Nazi gathering on the day of Imia on January 31, 2015 drew hundreds of people and numerous organizations from the entire anarchist and left spectrum.

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The trial in context

Golden Dawn members were arrested with the charge of having set up a criminal organization, with the charges extending also to manslaughter, blackmail and money laundering. After investigating more than one hundred cases, magistrates have now completed case files for 78 defendants, 30 of whom are detained, including 8 out of the 16 members of Golden Dawn's parliamentary group. The case file includes the murder of Pavlos Fyssas, the attack against PAME billposters, the raid against Egyptian fishermen, the attacks against the Antipnoia social center, the attack against the Synergeio social center (which had previously been filed under unknown perpetrators, despite the links established with Golden Dawn MPs), an attack against a student in P. Faliro and foreign workers in Crete, and the assassination of Pakistani cyclist Shehzad Luqman.

Moreover, the treatment of Golden Dawn members in jail seems to be different from that of other prisoners. Their transfer to the women's prison in Korydallos raised complaints by other prisoners for, among other things, racist and sexist remarks and lack of space, considering that one wing that would fit 100 female prisoners has been reserved for Golden Dawn members. It is not a coincidence that more than one year after their arrest the trial has not begun yet and detained MPs were recently given leave to vote – fully retaining their parliamentary status – in the elections for a President of the

Republic, causing turmoil in Parliament.

Even the trial itself gives the impression of a staged performance, orchestrated by the deep state itself that led to the emergence of the extreme-right group. The Nazi organization will be prosecuted under the non-revised version of article 187 of the Criminal Code on criminal organizations. This article has since been extended with article 187a on terrorist acts and will apply to Nikos Romanos and other anarchists arrested after the Velvendo bank robbery. In the eyes of young aspiring lawyers, as we recently witnessed during the occupation of the Law School to defend his hunger strike, anarchist Nikos Romanos is already deemed a 'terrorist'. In the name of security and the climate of fear injected into society, an autonomous action is to be penalized on stricter terms than the concerted and repeated violence of a political party.

However, going into too much detail about the basis for the conviction would run the risk of comparing the pros and cons of two institutional arrangements – non-revised article 187 or revised article 187a on terrorist organizations creating special conditions for non-compliant subjects – that give fertile ground to convictions based on 'thought crimes'. The movement fights strongly against this. Criminal responsibility should be individualized and linked with certain motives. Therefore, the dispersion of criminal responsibility from the top to the bottom is not recommended from both a political and a legal point of view, as it would open a dangerous path. Thus, the most appropriate way to act is from the bottom to the top. Rather than being punished for their ideas, a sounder base in terms of justice would be to punish Golden Dawn members for their actions.

Concluding remarks

A year and a half after their arrest and after two elections while in jail, the national elections of January 2015 still

confirmed Golden Dawn's relatively strong electoral base, with the party obtaining 6.28% of the vote and 17 seats in Parliament, becoming the third biggest political force in the country. This good showing could be the result of people voting for an extreme-right party to rival the left, or it could be just another example of how prison produces 'heroes' in the eyes of some people. It also confirms that a long-term solution is not likely to be found solely by addressing the legal aspect of the Golden Dawn issue, as such an approach will not achieve more than to sweep the beast of right-wing extremism under the rug.

Banning the party would be misleading, because it could reappear under a different name and we would constantly be faced with the same situation. We already witnessed this back in 2005, when – after an anarchist attack against Golden Dawn offices – the Nazis were provisionally forced to change their nameto 'Patriotic Alliance' and relocate. Beyond this, no form of thinking should be banned, let alone by a court ruling. Errors in the system are the ones that drive it. However, when a system's foundation is unsound, it will have to be rebooted – and the very core of Nazi thinking shows how unsound the system has become. By its very nature, Nazi philosophy goes against the survival of humankind.

Violence against difference means violence against our co-inhabitants of this planet. This contradicts every notion of the human as a social being, tending to present man as an isolated, self-centered individual who is only concerned about its own needs, showing total disrespect for the collective well-being. Against all odds and fatalistic attitudes, a sound part of Greek and European society still fights for a different kind of organization, through social emancipation, consistent struggles for the preservation of nature, collective pharmacies and medical centers, solidarity structures, free social centers and the adoption of fairer practices for a better world.

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