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“Here to Stay”? Golden Dawn, From the Political Margin to the Political Foreground¹

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“When we won 5.3% in the Municipality of Athens [in 2010], they said it was circumstantial. We told them that we are here to stay. And from Athens we will spread to all of Greece. When on May 6 [2012] we won 6.9 per cent, they said that it was rage, anger, fear, and that people are ignorant ... Today, with the results of the elections, where (sic) Golden Dawn’s power remained stable at 7 per cent, it is proved that the nationalist movement is here to stay. And let them get used to it. They will be facing a nationalist movement. Both inside and outside the Parliament.” This statement by Nikos Michaloliakos, head of Golden Dawn (*Chrysi Avgi*), was made on June 17, 2012, on the night of national elections. His proclamation summed up the party’s electoral history until then: from political obscurity before 2010, Golden Dawn had managed to become a force to be reckoned with—and with representation in Parliament. “Golden Dawn is here to stay...Golden Dawn is the Greece of the future” Michaloliakos reiterated. (YouTube, 2012a). Two years later, the results of the European elections of May 2014 appear to confirm his prediction. Golden Dawn not only maintained its electoral influence in relation to the 2012 national elections, but increased it greatly and, what’s more, did so under seemingly adverse circumstances as almost all members of its leadership were incarcerated on allegations of establishing and leading a criminal organization.

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Is this an incidental phenomenon or a trend with long-term prospects? Was the exponential rise of Golden Dawn merely political fallout from the economic crisis and a consequence of the recession's effects on a large part of the Greek population, or is it a sign of deep-rooted processes that have taking place for years beneath the surface of democratic normality? Does Golden Dawn's rise reflect the disillusionment and anger that part of the electorate feels towards the political mainstream or, conversely, does it point to a steady shift of a considerable number of voters towards the extreme right of the political spectrum? Is the Golden Dawn vote a protest vote cast without a clear grasp of the party's neo-Nazi, racist, and violent background or is it a conscious expression of an ideological preference inspired by anti-democratic reflexes?

The first success: the 2010 local elections

Through the end of the 2000s, Golden Dawn's influence was inconsequential. In the June 2009 European Parliament elections, it won 0.46 per cent of the vote and in national elections held four months later it polled just 0.29 per cent. Openly neo-Nazi, racist, anti-Semitic, and with a rich history of violence (Psarras, 2012), Golden Dawn had remained on the political fringe for years. This began to change with the 2010 municipal elections. Michaloliakos stood for Athens mayor and took 5.29 per cent of the vote, placing sixth and securing a seat on the Athens City Council. Michaloliakos' slate "Hellenic Dawn for Athens" had especially high returns in the Sixth Municipal District, placing fourth with 8.38 per cent of the vote (Ministry of the Interior, 2010).

This was not accidental. The Sixth Municipal District of Athens includes neighborhoods like Ayios Pandleimonas which has seen a high influx of migrants. Golden Dawn had been active there for a long period of time, distributing food to Greeks only and providing security escorts to pensioners so they "wouldn't fall prey to muggers", and using violence to "protect" the "indigenous residents" against "foreign invaders" (Dinas et al., 2013). The formation of paramilitary-type groups openly engaged in criminal activity completed the picture. Migrants were targeted explicitly with frequent, and often bloody or fatal, assaults. Similar reasons also

saw “Hellenic Dawn for Athens” win a markedly higher than average percentage of the vote (6.94) in the Fourth Municipal District, placing fourth. (Ministry of the Interior, 2010).

The approval at the ballot box of Golden Dawn’s xenophobic and racist tactics was the first indication that it had acquired, albeit at the local level, a solid corps of voters who did not merely identify with extreme rhetoric but with extreme action too. Golden Dawn’s success was not *in spite of* its members’ violence against immigrants in Ayios Pandleimonas and other Athens neighborhoods but *because* of it. In many cases, Golden Dawn appeared to supplant the police or other state authorities. The far-right party had managed to fill the gap created by the ineffectiveness of the lawful state in addressing citizens’ problems and as result acquired substantial electoral benefits (Lygeros, 2010). Golden Dawn appealed to the conservative reflexes of public opinion and was vindicated for its strategic choice.

Lift off: the 2012 national elections

Golden Dawn’s success in the Athens municipal election was unique; no similar phenomenon was observed in any municipal races in the rest of Greece. But this success became a springboard for Golden Dawn to increase its popularity. In the May 2012 national elections, it achieved what had seemed inconceivable: it won 440,894 votes, which at 6.79 per cent made it the sixth-largest party in Greece and gave it 21 seats in Parliament. (Ministry of the Interior, 2012a). This was the best performance of a far-right party in Greek national elections after 1974. The party’s influence remained almost unchanged in the repeat national elections of June 2012: Golden Dawn won 425,990 votes or 6.92 per cent, which was translated to 18 seats in Parliament as the fifth-largest party (Ministry of the Interior, 2012b).

A qualitative analysis of the results of the 2012 elections reveals a series of interesting facts that allow a more thorough understanding of Golden Dawn’s success. One is the party’s surprising ability to attract voters from many social strata (Public Issue, 2012b). It also exhibited high penetration in voters under the age of 35 years and even higher in first-time voters

(Public Issue, 2012a, 2012c) many of whom it had attracted through extensive use of the internet (including mainly social media websites such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube). Geographically, the party exhibited a strikingly balanced vote distribution in urban, suburban, and rural areas (Public Issue, 2012a, 2012c), whilst its electoral power had spread through the whole country: it failed to meet the three per cent threshold for election to Parliament in just three of 56 constituencies in May and only in one in June (Ministry of the Interior, 2012a, 2012b).

Golden Dawn's performance at the polls remained almost unaffected by the fact that the June elections were held under conditions of political polarization that substantially decreased the vote share of almost all parties except for the top two, New Democracy and Syriza; the only other party that increased its percentage, though marginally, was the Democratic Left. The fact that seven out of ten voters who had voted for Golden Dawn in the May elections voted for it again in the June elections (Public Issue, 2012c) was yet another clear indication of the existence of a sizeable, and at any rate solid, corps of supporters. Golden Dawn ranked high in strong party identifiers: almost half (46 per cent) of Golden Dawn voters identified themselves as "nationalists" (i.e., aligned themselves with the party's official characterization), surpassing all other parliamentary parties with the sole exception of the Communist Party of Greece, 54 per cent of whose voters declared themselves to be "communists" (Public Issue, 2012d).

Third party: the 2014 European Parliament elections

As a parliamentary party, Golden Dawn adhered to the rhetoric that had produced its electoral gains. The party denounced (other) politicians en masse as corrupt and traitors, presenting itself as the only patriotic political force ("the nation's vigilant conscience", as Michaloliakos phrased it, 2013). It vehemently attacked the Memorandum (bailout terms) and the "international usurers" (Michaloliakos, 2012), proposed the unilateral write-off "of the unlawful and onerous debt", kept the issue of illegal immigration high on its agenda, and maintained a hard nationalist line in matters of foreign policy (Golden Dawn, 2012). Above all, it made sure

to emphasize its “anti-systemic” character, attempting to turn the years of its political marginalization to its advantage: since the party had never participated in the government, or even in Parliament, it presented itself as the only party not plagued by the sins of the “rotten” and “bankrupt” political system of the “*metapolitefsi*” (the period following the collapse in 1974 of the seven-year dictatorship) regime change (Ellinas, 2013). Glorification of the dictatorial regimes of August 4, 1936 (Golden Dawn, 2013) and April 21, 1967 (YouTube, 2012b), denial of the Holocaust (Kathimerini, 2013, Bourdaras, 2013), acts of violence by party officials as well as members of Parliament, for example against immigrant street vendors (Kathimerini, 2012a 2012b), habitual use of vulgar language and instigation of altercations in the Parliament (Karageorgou, 2013), were the culmination of the unusual activity of a parliamentary party in Greece.

These idiosyncratic tactics, however, were in fact totally compatible with the party’s neo-Nazi ideology, and produced gains at the polls. In public opinion surveys, Golden Dawn seemed to remain steadily third in voters’ preferences, managing not simply to maintain the vote percentage won in the 2012 elections but to increase it (Public Issue, 2012e, 2013a, 2013b, 2013c, 2013d, 2013e, 2013f, 2013g, 2013h). The assassination of Pavlos Fyssas in September 2013 by a member of Golden Dawn and the concomitant imprisonment of the party leader and other senior party officials on charges of participation in a criminal organization, demonstrated once again the existence of an unwavering group of supporters. The percentage the party received in opinion polls remained unchanged, while its position as third party was now consolidated (Metron Analysis, 2013, Public Issue, 2014). The defendants presented their prosecutions as “proof” of the party’s unconventional attitude against the “ethno-nihilistic” and “genuflecting” political establishment (Michaloliakos, 2013).

The European Parliament elections on May 25, 2014, confirmed poll projections. Despite a substantially lower turnout than in the general elections (59.97 per cent compared to 65.12 per cent in May 2012 and 62.49 per cent in June 2012) (Ministry of the Interior, 2012a, 2012b, 2014b), Golden Dawn received more than 536,000 votes. The increase in absolute values was of the order of 21.7 per cent compared to the national elections

in May 2012 and almost 26 per cent compared to the national elections in June 2012. With its vote percentage skyrocketing to 9.39 per cent, Golden Dawn emerged as the third-largest party and elected three MEPs (Ministry of the Interior, 2014b).

Almost all qualitative characteristics discerned in the 2012 elections reappeared in 2014. The distribution of Golden Dawn votes was absolutely evenly among urban, suburban, and rural areas (Mavris, 2014), while for the first time Golden Dawn surpassed the three per cent threshold in every electoral district without exception, earning double-digit percentages in 23 of 57 constituencies (Ministry of the Interior, 2014b). Its popularity among younger voters was also quite substantial: it was marginally third (far ahead of the next party) in the 18-24 age group and second by far among university students. In both of these categories the party's influence was approximately double its polling numbers across the board. Golden Dawn also polled second among the unemployed. Finally, it was the party with the greatest ability of rallying its voters, as in May 2014 almost four out of five of its voters stated that they had also voted for Golden Dawn in the last general election (Mavris, 2014): the core of its adherents not only showed a remarkable resilience, but consolidated even more over time.

Financial crisis and the “misguided voters”

The sharp turn of voters towards the far-right in the two national elections held in 2012 was initially, and rather cursorily, attributed to the interplay of two factors: Greeks' anger at the economic recession on the one hand and the vast majority of voters' ignorance of Golden Dawn's true face on the other. This was a convenient interpretation that provided everyone with an excuse. But it was not entirely true.

There is no doubt that the meteoric political rise of Golden Dawn benefitted greatly from the inauspicious financial circumstances. The severe recession in afflicting the Greek economy combined with the strict austerity measures imposed to prevent a Greek bankruptcy, resulted in a decline in the living standards of large segments of the population. The situation was further exacerbated by the exponential increase of unemployment rates. In this atmosphere, the electorate's disenchantment is definitely

part of the explanation of the right-wing shift. The disproportionately large influence of Golden Dawn on the young and the unemployed (Public Issue, 2012c, Mavris, 2014) provides a clear indication of the validity of this assertion since these demographic groups (and especially people that exhibit both attributes) were among the populations afflicted to a greater extent by the crisis.

It is, however, misleading to assume that the financial crisis in itself constitutes the sole root cause of Golden Dawn's rise. In other countries that experienced similar financial difficulties—for instance Spain, Portugal, and Ireland—no similar bolstering of far-right parties, let alone neo-Nazi ones, was observed. The theory that attributes Golden Dawn's rise solely to the economic crisis does not explain why the shift of voters was so one-sided towards the far-right, and there was no corresponding shift towards the extra-parliamentary left. It also ignores the fact that the emergence of Golden Dawn from the political fringe had begun before the population became fully aware of the consequences of the economic crisis that disrupted the Greek political landscape (Dinas et al., 2013): in the fall of 2010, when Michaloliakos was elected to the Athens city council, the Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK) was still the most popular party. In May 2012, Golden Dawn voters were almost equally divided between those who claimed to be facing financial difficulties and those claiming to be living comfortably (Public Issue, 2012a): a significant increase in the number of Golden Dawn supporters of the first category at the expense of those in the second did not occur until June 2012 and after (Public Issue, 2012c, Mavris, 2014).

The excuse of voter ignorance of Golden Dawn's positions is refuted by the facts. For example, in January 2011, Michaloliakos did not hesitate to use the Nazi salute in the Athens City Council chambers (Bitsika, 2011), an incident widely-covered in the media. Maybe the details were not widely known, but it is impossible to believe that in May 2012 more than 440,000 voters were ignorant of at least the general context of Golden Dawn's extremist ideology. Even if we were to accept that many voters were unaware at the time, the electoral results of the following month, when there had already been an avalanche of information on the works and days of Golden Dawn, utterly deconstruct the theory of the "misguided (but

nonetheless democratic) voters". The myth of the "misled vote" was permanently debunked after the 2014 elections, which were held after Golden Dawn's neo-Nazi background had been fully disclosed, and after its most prominent members were indicted on very serious charges, arrested, and remanded into custody.

To a very great extent, a vote for Golden Dawn was and continues to be a deliberate political act. On the one hand it expresses disapproval of the political system. On the other, it verifies the existence of a "far-right pool" within the Greek electorate, which was either latent or had been only partially expressed in the past: in 1977 by the royalist National Alignment, during the 1980s by the pro-junta EPEN, and after 2000 by the far-right populism of LAOS. What the economic crisis did was to give rise to the appropriate circumstances for Golden Dawn's extremist rhetoric to find wider credence amongst a segment of the public opinion which, however, was already predisposed to accept it. The crisis acted as catalyst: on the one hand it facilitated the emergence from obscurity and the expression of pre-existing far-right reflexes among Greek society, and on the other it radicalized electoral behavior to the point of supporting a neo-Nazi party. The political debate's confinement between the poles "memorandum/anti-memorandum" made Golden Dawn's job even easier: the persistence of some members of democratic parties to resort to extreme language regarding the existence of a "memorandum junta" and a "collaborator occupation government" subservient to "foreign decision centers", opened wide the way for far-right demagogy (Papasarantopoulos, 2012).

Violence and authoritarianism

The view that support for Golden Dawn would shrink once voters became aware of its extremist and anti-democratic character was also false. Senior Golden Dawn officials' violent behavior did not diminish support for the party. The assault of two female members of Parliament—the Greek Communist Party's Liana Kanelli and SYRIZA's Rena Dourou on a live television current affairs show in June 2012 by Ilias Kassidiaris, a Golden Dawn member of Parliament, is telling (*To Vima*, 2012): overall, Golden Dawn's popularity increased (Papasarantopoulos, 2012), while specifically

in the district of Attica, in which Kassidiaris was running for Parliament, the party's percentage did not follow the marginal average decrease of support, but marked a slight rise in the order of 0.26 per cent (Ministry of the Interior, 2012b). Not only were voters not alienated by this violent act, but on the contrary they rewarded Kassidiaris at the ballot box. His slate's exceptional returns in Athens in the May 2014 municipal elections, winning 16.14 per cent of the vote and polling fourth (Ministry of the Interior, 2014a), reaffirmed this trend.

In reality, Golden Dawn's violent character was a contributing factor to its success. As Yiannis Voulgaris (2012) aptly pointed out, "the atmosphere that fostered the extremist far-right was the spread of unlawfulness and the mass approval of political violence exercised over the last years in the name either of the 'Nation' or the 'People', or both." Public opinion surveys conducted during the summer of 2011 revealed that half the Greek population approved of jeering at politicians (Karakousis, 2011). If the slogans chanted during the same period by the *indignados* protestors at Syntagma square calling for Parliament to be set on fire and gallows set up for politicians expressed the feelings of a segment of the Greek population, then Golden Dawn was the party that could turn theory into practice.

Even worse, the "indignant citizens' movement" offered Golden Dawn the unique opportunity to be reinvent itself in the turbid waters of the baptismal font of the "upper square". It is true that the Golden Dawn phenomenon took roots in the Ayios Pandleimonas area, but it started to burgeon and create the conditions for its political legitimization in Syntagma square during the summer of 2011, due to its extreme rhetoric that targeted the political system (Marantzidis, 2012). Golden Dawn appropriated and capitalized on a flow of ideas already permeating Greek society, which did not reject neither displays of disobedience to the law, nor even violence, as long as they are clothed in a supposed (even rhetorical) "anti-establishment" guise (Doxiadis & Matsaganis, 2012).

The growing popularity of Golden Dawn's anti-democratic discourse is tangible proof of the rising influence across the social spectrum of similar disdain for parliamentary government (Klapsis, 2013). This phenomenon is closely linked to the growing nostalgia for authoritarian modes of government that can "restore order" and resolve (almost as if by magic) the

problems that plague Greek society (Marantzidis, 2013). Opinion surveys reveal that one out of three Greeks says the country's overall situation during the 1967-1974 dictatorship was better than today a view that, not surprisingly, becomes the majority position among Golden Dawn voters (*Eleftherotypia*, 2013). Under these circumstances, the far-right anti-libertarianism finds fertile ground on which to flourish. Golden Dawn offered a commodity which was already in demand. It did not create the environment, but it capitalized on it as much as possible.

"Here to stay"?

The prediction that the 2012 success was transient and its dynamic would soon diminish (see, for example, Zoulas, 2012) has far from been confirmed: Golden Dawn neither made it to Parliament due to "borrowed voters", nor, by extension, proved to be an "one-election party". The results of the 2014 European Parliament elections leave no doubt that Golden Dawn has acquired a steadfast and ideologically quite solid corps of supporters who have repeatedly expressed their preference at the ballot-box. It is also certain that Golden Dawn has a much wider audience than the one that actually votes for it. Its authoritarian, xenophobic, and racist ideas, combined with its ultra-nationalist rhetoric and violent practices, appeal to greater numbers of people than those who actually vote for Golden Dawn on polling day.

Golden Dawn exhibits a dynamic that is very different than the one observed in other far-right parties in Greece after 1974. Its difference is not just quantitative, in the sense that it has historically achieved the best performances within its ideological-political space both on the level of national and European elections. Its difference is equally, if not principally, qualitative. The party's substantially-increased popularity among young people is a particularly important factor with potentially explosive consequences. Moreover, the geographical distribution of voters indicates that Golden Dawn manages to overcome barriers that in the past appeared insurmountable. It does achieve high percentages in areas that in the 1977 general elections were bastions of the National Alignment, and in the 1984 European Parliament elections of EPEN, but it advances much

farther than that, as it maintains footholds even in areas that traditionally detested the far-right. The example of Crete is telling. Neither the National Party in 1977 nor EPEN in 1984 managed to win more than one per cent even in one of the island's four prefectures where their returns respectively averaged 0.66 per cent and 0.36 per cent. In the 2014 European Parliament elections, the same prefectures might have been among the weakest for Golden Dawn,² but the votes it received there was on average 4.62 per cent. The difference is vast.

All the individual characteristics of its successive electoral successes lead to the conclusion that Golden Dawn is not a party that simply temporarily attracts a protest vote and thus a party that will soon evaporate from the electoral landscape. It is highly probable that the gradual economic recovery will stem the current of support towards the extreme far-right. However, it is highly doubtful that a reversal of the economic climate will automatically deprive Golden Dawn of the vast majority of its supporters, condemning it to a marginal role like the one it had prior to 2010. Maybe the ongoing investigation of its leading officials poses a greater danger to the Golden Dawn, due to the rift it might create within its ranks: some indications of this are already surfacing through different lines of defense adopted by some of the defendants.

Without disregarding its great importance, the economic crisis is not the sole cause feeding the Golden Dawn phenomenon. Social structures, local particularities, and instances of historical continuity also exert a great influence (Marantzidis, 2014). The myth of the "Greek chosen people", the widespread appeal of conspiracy theories about "foreign dark centers" plotting Greece's destruction, the latent anti-Semitism,³ social and racial prejudice, xenophobia, and the familiarization of violence are additional factors that had already created a fertile ground for the far-right. By taking advantage of all these parameters to a greater or lesser

2. Rethymno, Herakleio and Lasithi are the three constituencies in which Golden Dawn has the lowest percentage in all elections (national and European) between 2012 and 2014 (Ministry of the Interior, 2012a, 2012b, 2014b).

3. According to a recent international survey, Greece is the EU country with the highest percentages of anti-Semitic stereotypes (69 per cent), way ahead of Poland which is second (45 per cent) (Anti-Defamation League, 2014).

extent Golden Dawn managed to emerge from obscurity and enter the political mainstream. Weighing current facts, it is highly uncertain that Golden Dawn will go away any time soon.

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