The Rise of Extreme Right in Europe: The Case of Greece

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to elaborate and explain the developments in Greece while analyzing the causes of the rise of the extreme right throughout Europe with a comparative perspective. Extreme-right parties are gaining ground by means of their opposition to the current system within the changing political conditions. They adopt a populist terminology targeting the economic instability as well as social and political discontent, thus presenting an alternative to the mainstream parties which fail to fulfill the expectations of the voters. In this regard, the extreme-right demonstrates a solid structure and ideological coherence, putting constant emphasis on xenophobia and immigration issue.

Ethnic nationalism does not only threaten the immigrants in the EU member states, but also poses a threat on the co-existence of European societies by undermining the cultural roots of the European integration. The European Union which once had adopted the motto “unity in diversity” came to a point where diversity is considered as a threat towards social and economic welfare. The main concern regarding the rise of nationalist tendencies is not the mere nominal increase in the support to the extreme-right parties, but also the discourse shift of the central parties towards the right in order to receive support of this wave.

The Golden Dawn Party which entered the Greek parliament with a Nazi discourse and the political environment and other causes that mustered support to it. It is worth a thorough investigation that a political party using Nazi symbols and discourse received considerable amount of support out of the Greek society that had a giant struggle against Nazi ideology during the WW II. Thus, the Greek experience poses an interesting case study both in terms of its unique conditions and the general conditions such as economic crisis and immigration that breed racism throughout Europe.
Rise of Extreme Right in Europe: An Overview

Europe has witnessed a lot of turmoil based on ideologies, feeding on intolerance, xenophobia, ethnic cleansing, racism, chauvinism and anti-Semitism in history. Debates on this issue broadened after the 2nd World War as the Western European societies wanted to develop more tolerant political systems. After 1945, with the defeat of fascism and the victory of liberal democracy, increasingly stable political structures developed across Western Europe. Anti-fascist victory, economic growth, lower unemployment rates and the discrediting of racism all worked against the extreme right parties. However, in the last two decades of the twentieth century, new political movements managed to receive significant levels of support. (Hainsworth, 2008, p. 1) More recently, researchers have noticed that popular support for further European integration has decreased in many European countries. The right-wing political parties which initially had pro-European stances became increasingly Eurosceptic, especially after the enlargement waves towards the Eastern Europe in 2004 and 2007. (Mudde, 2007, p. 160)

The contemporary extreme right has emerged in socio-political and historical circumstances that are very different from the emergence of fascist ideologies in the post-war period. In the contemporary incident, liberal democracy has become more established and the Cold War is over. (Hainsworth, 2008, p. 3) Like any other political group, the extreme right has been interpreting and adapting to globalization, European integration, migratory flows and multi-culturalism. It intends to fill the vacuum created by the growth in Western society of a certain post-materialism that has shifted the perspectives through which individuals approach politics and values in a post-industrial world. (Ignazi, 2003, p. 34)

Until 1980s, the literature on the radical right was concerned with the past experiences. However, with the rise of new radical parties in 1980s revived the debate and stimulated further contributions to the literature. Political parties such as “National Front” in France, “Republicans” in Germany and “Flemish Block” in Belgium suggested radical solutions that contradict the nature of liberal democracies on issues like immigration, citizenship and national identity. Xenophobia and skepticism towards other cultures were further stimulated as a part of these policies. (Vural, 2005, p. 23) In 1990s the phenomenon further developed and the radical right parties became consolidated as a frequently encountered pattern throughout Europe.

In spite of the abundance of literature on this matter, information is arguably disorganized and confusing due to research difficulties and terminological confusion. In this regard, one of the main problems is the lack of a widely accepted definition of the “extreme right”. Some scholars use the term to address an ideological framework, while others suggest that “coercion” should be an element if one has to name a movement as “extreme right”. Although the core elements of the phenomenon differ for each scholar, certain elements such as nationalism, racism, xenophobia, anti-democratic tendencies and advocacy for strong state are associated with “extreme right” most frequently. (Vural, 2005, p. 23) The controversy on the definition leads to the usage of other terms such as neo-fascism, new radical right, ultra-nationalism, new populism etc. (Vural, 2005, p. 25)
Several theories intend to explain support for radical right parties. One of these theories is the “normal pathology thesis” that adopt the idea is that when the society transforms fundamentally and rapidly, this transformation leads to a detachment between those who benefit the change and those who are disadvantaged. (Mudde, The Populist Radical Right: A Pathological Normalcy, 2010) According to this view, the second group tends to vote for populist parties where they perceive a remedy for their frustration. Another approach is Ignazi’s thesis which suggests that parties on the extreme right in Western Europe are post-materialist rather than fascist or neo-fascist. As such, they do not seek to revive the myth of fascism, but they attempt to respond to the needs and demands of post-industrial society. (Ignazi, 2003, pp. 2-3)

In order to develop a comprehensive perspective, the radical right parties of Europe can be classified according to their characteristics in reference to their particular political history. In countries such as France, Italy, Austria and Belgium, the extreme right has achieved a considerable amount of success both numerically and over a relatively long period of time – even entering government in some cases. Switzerland and the Netherlands are arguably the most noticeable incidents on the extreme or far right advancement. On the other hand, Scandinavia constitutes a special case where the relevant actors have emerged as right-wing populist movements, and later radicalized their discourse on issues of immigration and asylum seeking. Germany and Britain can be classified together, since the extreme right has been marginalized. Far right groups were absorbed by the mainstream right or reduced to the fringes of the political system with very limited voter support. (Ignazi, 2003, p. 196)

Finally, three Mediterranean countries (Greece, Portugal and Spain) constitute a special case, on common grounds such as extended experiences of state authoritarianism, late introduction of liberal democracy, delayed entry into the European Union and marginalization of the contemporary extreme right. These countries became democratic after having been ruled by right-authoritarian regimes for many decades: Portugal and Spain uninterrupted since the 1930s, and Greece from 1967 to 1974, but with a ‘low intensity’ democratic regime in the post-war years until 1967. In the mid-1970s all three abandoned their fascist-like regimes. (Linz & Stephan, 1996) Notwithstanding, or because of this heritage, no sizeable extreme right party has ever emerged. (Ignazi, 2003, p. 187)

This article claims that the economic crisis in Europe hit Greece very heavily; this bottleneck led the rise of the extreme ideologies and the parties in and brought tremendous losses to mainstream parties. In order to understand the transformation of Greek politics from center to the extremism, this article aims to focus on the rise of Golden Dawn—fascist and racist organization in Greece as a result of the economic recession in the country. This rise will be pointed out by mentioning the traditionally marginal position of extreme right in Greek politics.
The Rise of Golden Dawn

Golden Dawn is a racist and neo-Nazi organization founded in the beginning of 1980s whose members are accused of carrying out acts of violence and hate crimes against the immigrants and their opponents. At the time of crisis when the Greek state lost its absolute control, the party members operated in certain ‘troubled’ areas of the capital city and offers security to local residents. Golden Dawn adopts a highly ethnocentric language with the motto “Greece belongs to Greeks”. They benefited from the collapse of trust among the EU citizens when most of the Greeks lost their confidence in Europe. (Eurobarometer 78, 2012)

Since 1981 elections in Greek politics have been dominated by two major parties on the center left and on the center right (PASOK and the New Democracy). Since then, the Greek politics have been marked with populism, favoritism and corruption. Mismanagement of the country created the domestic factors of the most severe economic crisis in the history of modern Greece.

When the economic crisis in the US spread to Europe in 2008, it was clear that Greece was one of the first countries to get effected with its weak economy and high public debt. In its first years, the gravity of the crisis was underestimated domestically and internationally. Greece took the first bailout package in 2010 and the second in 2012, and faced with harsh austerity measures which require wage cuts, higher taxes, reforms and privatization.

The international supervisors of the Greek economy (Troika – European Commission, European Central Bank, and IMF) started to dictate economy policies to the Greek governments. This was humiliating for Greek public who started to suffer from austerity measures and harsh economic conditions. Thus, the mainstream parties which have dominated the Greek politics nearly for forty years with populist policies were punished by the Greek public in 2012. 2012 May elections brought the end of the old party system in Greece, on the grounds that the extreme parties both on the left and on the right gained significant support while the center parties lost their traditional dominant positions, as a reaction to their support to austerity measures and bailouts.

The most striking result was the rise of the far right party- Golden Dawn. A party that received merely 0.29 % of the vote (19,624 votes) in the 2009 elections rose to 6.97 % (441,018 votes) in May 2012. (Elinas, 2003, p. 1) This was totally different from the voting pattern of the Greek society since post-authoritarian far right groups have been absorbed by the mainstream right or relegated to the fringes of the political system with very limited voter support. (Ellinas, 2003, p. 1) However, with the loosening of state authority in Greece as a result of economic crisis, the party found the grounds for getting steamed up.

The first electoral success was their 5.3% vote in Athens municipal elections and they succeeded to enter into Greek parliament in 2012 by getting 6.97 % of the total votes and securing 18 seats. (Triandafyllidou & Kouki, 2012, p. 2) This rise was the first and most
significant victory of the extreme right in Greek politics and created a new era which is
worth exploring and therefore began to attract scholarly attention. Despite the fact that
their members involved in violence and hate crimes against the immigrants, minorities,
political opponents and LGBT people, the opinion polls indicate that the Golden Dawn
would receive 11-12% of the votes if there was an election in the near future. (Ellinas,
2003, p. 2)

The most important reasons of this rise are:

1. Economic Crisis – Extreme ideologies and the movements tend to rise at times of
economic crises and recessions. The rise of fascism in Europe in 1930s, after the
Great Depression is the most significant evident of this tendency. As a result of
the debt crisis in Greece, traditional central parties lost their positions and led the
rise in right and left wing extremism.

Since the beginning of the economic crisis in 2009, wages have fallen by a third
and the official unemployment rate has reached 25% and half of Greece's young
population is in search of a job to survive. The prices of basic commodities have
risen dramatically and more than three million people in the country are left under
300 Euros per month for a living. (Megaloudi, 2012)

People have lost hope for the future as a result of unemployment, poverty and
deeplening recessions. (Tzogopoulos, 2013) According to Eurobarometer 78
(2012), Greeks have one of the highest pessimism degree among Europeans. 78 %
of the Greeks believe that the impact of the crisis on employment rates has not
reached its peak yet, and the worst is still to come. (Eurobarometer 78, 2012, p. 6)
Also, the rate of uncertainty is significantly high among the Greek population. 70
% of Greek population “live day by day” and believe that their current situation
does not allow them to make future plans. 88 % of the Greeks believe that
politics is not working out in their country. Having one of the highest
unemployment rates in Europe, the Greeks started to question the existence of
illegal immigrants and perceive them as a threat for ethnic Greeks. Unemployment is a phenomenon which is highly associated with the support for
the extreme right.

2. Xenophobia and the immigration - Since 1990s, with the collapse of the
communism and the emergence of new states in the Balkans, Greece has been
transformed into a “country of immigrants” from a “country of emigrants”. Immigration did not start accidentally in 2012; it has been the reality of Greek
state and the society since 1990. However, the economic recession and the high
unemployment rates led a serious xenophobia and anti-immigrant discourse
among the Greek public. Currently about 0.8 million of 11 million Greek
population is of foreign origin. In addition to the Albanian immigrants in the first
wave, Greece has been faced with immigrants coming from Asia and Africa by
crossing Turkish-Greek border. (Triandafyllidou & Kouki, 2012, p. 2) Integration
of immigrants became a tougher question with the effect ongoing financial
bottleneck. According to a survey, 75% of Greeks associate the rise of criminality with foreigners who they believe to damage the national identity and civilization of the country. (Tzogopoulos, 2013) Koronaiou & Sakellariou stated that the ‘urban myths’ have helped Golden Dawn to build its profile among the Greeks, as an organization which assists the Greek people, fights against the immigrants and substitutes for the increasingly absent Greek state. (2013, s. 333) the Golden Dawn is perceived by many as the defender of Greek nation, a helper of Greek people when it is needed, protecting ethnic Greeks from the threats of immigrants., this impression is further corroborated through urban legends and by the mainstream media.

Also, the party organizes “only for Greeks” events such as free food distribution and blood donation campaigns which attract attention of the public. Criticizing the government for providing free health services for immigrants, Golden Dawn initiated a blood donation campaign and their slogan was ‘Donate blood – Save a Greek Soul’, ‘Blood bank and bank for platelets, only for Greeks, who need our help’, (Koronaiou & Sakellariou, 2013, s. 333) Free food distribution to the ethnic Greeks is another event. Party members ask for identity cards before the delivery thus excluding immigrants from their service. Another concern of the Golden Dawn is to provide job for unemployed Greeks. They claim that each immigrant worker means an unemployed Greek; so in order to combat with unemployment, immigrants who “steal” jobs from Greeks must be sent from the country. Prominent figures of the neo-fascist Golden Dawn also advocate for ‘placing landmines along the border with Turkey’ in order to prevent migration and to ‘throw immigrants and their children out in the streets’ to open places for ethnic Greeks in schools and hospitals. They are not bothered to be called as racists. The leader of the party once commented that Greece belonged to Greeks and they were proud to be Greeks; and if it meant racism, then they would accept to be racists. (Swarts & Karakatsanis, 2013, s. 112)

3. LAOS’ attitude towards austerity measures and support of LAOS for Papademos government - The pro-austerity stance of LAOS helped Golden Dawn to attract the extreme right voters who are particularly against the austerity plans and bail-outs. By supporting the unity government headed by technocrat Lucas Papademos LAOS lost their electoral base and Golden Dawn succeeded to attract the LAOS voters who were in search of an alternative with its anti-austerity and anti-memorandum stance.

4. The loss of credibility to Europe - According to the latest Euro barometer results, Greeks have lost their confidence in the European Union. When the future of strong Europe is considered, Greeks have the lowest score of perception among the EU members. Besides, they have the highest score of ‘distrust in the EU’ with 88 %. Also, 63 % of the Greeks do not feel close to the other European nations, and this score is also the highest among all Europeans. Greeks do not regard the European Union as a ‘democratic’ ‘efficient’ and ‘protective’ organization. They blame the EU since the lack of crisis management in Euro
zone put Greece into an uncertain position. Especially, Austerity measures imposed by Troika worsened the economic condition of the Greek society and created discontent among the public. Therefore, Greek people punished pro-austerity and pro-European parties in May and June 2012 elections by voting for the extreme parties.

Concluding Remarks

Since 1981, Greek politics have been dominated by the mainstream parties – PASOK and New Democracy, leaving very little room for electoral victory of extreme parties. It can be stated that the extreme ideologies have been absorbed by those center parties. The far right political parties remained marginal by showing insufficient electoral success since the collapse of the dictatorship in 1974. Only in the times of national propaganda such as “Macedonia name issue”, they succeeded to attract more voters by using populist rhetoric.

The collapse of the communism and emergence of new states in the Balkans created new challenges for the Greek state. People from neighboring countries, especially from Albania started to pass the borders in search of a better life. This wave was followed by African and Asian immigrants who could pass Turkish-Greek border in order to reach Europe. This wave of immigration together with the economic crisis since 2009 made Greece a good ground for rise of extreme right.

Obviously, the vast majority of the Greek citizens are disturbed by the deeds of Golden Dawn. Recently, a campaign was initiated on twitter to boycott corporations that place advertisements on hate-speech promoting TV shows.

Rise of Golden Dawn and increasing hate crimes in Greece also arouse anxiety among the European Union organs. European Commissioner for Human Right Nils Muižnieks paid a visit to Greece on February 2013 and wrote a report on hate crimes and intolerance in Greece. The report states that urgent action has to be taken in order to avoid future abuses. The Commissioner calls on the authorities to condemn firmly and unequivocally all instances of hate speech and hate crime. According to the report, far-reaching and systematic anti-racism and human rights awareness-raising campaigns should also be implemented, targeting particularly young people and schools. (Muižnieks, 2013) Greek Ministry of Justice declared that they will take measures in order to prevent hate crimes. With these measures, the parliamentarians who are involved in hate speech and hate crime will lose their political rights. Further sanctions will be on the table if the leader of the party takes part in these actions.
Bibliography


