Banning Golden Dawn Hasn't Stopped Greece's Slide to the Far Right

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The criminalization of the neo-Nazi group Golden Dawn in October 2020 was a watershed moment in the political turmoil that has enveloped Greece over the last decade. The party's dramatic electoral collapse marked, already before the ban, by its failure to elect any MPs in the 2019 general election fed a powerful ideological narrative claiming that the crisis was now over and that Greece was "back to normal." Golden Dawn's conviction was praised emphatically by the political establishment and corporate media alike.

Yet there was something puzzling in all this. Key figures from Greece's main parties, including the ruling New Democracy, had for years maintained direct relations with Golden Dawn. Indeed, when the party was at its peak, mainstream media showed a conspicuous tolerance toward its anti-immigrant rhetoric and even violent actions. Yet now the emerging establishment consensus explicitly terms Golden Dawn a Nazi party steeped in criminal practices. This condemnation has, however, taken a rather particular form, associating the neo-Nazi party with a generic extremism rather than investigating its real roots. The epithet "populist" (standing in place of "far-right") gave life to a popular version of horseshoe theory, attacking also the Left. This meant obfuscating this criminal organization's ideological origins: a litany of aggressive nationalism, racism, sexism, homophobia, and antisemitism, typical of the contemporary far right internationally.

In this sense, the condemnation of Golden Dawn by the political establishment, as well as media and public-opinion approval of the courts' decision to criminalize the party, were not followed by an equally emphatic rejection of its ideas and rhetoric. This is especially a problem given signs that these same ideas are mounting a comeback, including in Greece's institutions potentially leading to a further radicalization toward the far right.

**Institutional Heft**

We can get a better sense of the mainstreaming of far-right ideology how it produced a new common sense by looking at three of Greece's key institutions: the media, the army, and the church.

Our recently published research on the mainstreaming of far-right discourses in Greece has traced the formation of discursive patterns resembling Golden Dawn's own, as developed by key broadcasters and newspapers, army officers, and Orthodox priests, as well the spread of key aspects of such discourses even within feminist and LGBT circles.

Far from a merely exceptional discourse confined to Golden Dawn's own supporters, this ideology has circulated among wider strata of Greek society, all the while being redefined and mediated by the professional and political assumptions of the institutions in question.

"Research found that Greek mainstream media followed representations and rhetorical patterns identical to those employed by far-right media."

These three institutions hold particular significance in Greece. Indeed, the armed forces and the Orthodox Church have been its most politically powerful and ideologically influential institutions ever since the Greek state was established two centuries ago. Both perceive themselves as gatekeepers of a Greek identity, seen as Orthodox in its religion, monocultural, heteronormative, and patriarchal.
Already in this sense, these institutions present direct affinities with the traditionalism endorsed and expressed by the Greek far right. The media has, however, also played a central role in the circulation of far-right ideas, with an ongoing convergence between mainstream and extreme-right outlets in a country that performs poorly in international press freedom rankings.

**Moral Panic**

Over the last decade, mainstream media has especially contributed to the normalization of far-right discourse through its own recourse to a moral panic about Greece's future. After the collapse of the main parties during the crisis and Syriza’s rise to power, the media landscape converged toward a new consensus, portraying Greece as a nation whose very survival was at stake.

The new media landscape demonstrated an impressive homogeneity in terms of the dangers it portrayed, which boiled down to the usual suspects: invariably the country's immediate neighbors (i.e., Turkey and North Macedonia) and refugees, who were portrayed as undeserving scoundrels and agents of an alleged "Islamicization" of the country.

Greek mainstream media followed representations and rhetorical patterns identical to those employed by far-right media, especially in moments of "crisis" like the Prespa agreement (the deal reached in 2018 between Greece and North Macedonia regarding the latter's name), the height of the refugee crisis in 2015, and the border events in February and March 2020, when Turkish president Tayyip Erdogan declared that he would no longer stop asylum seekers from entering Europe.

Dailies traditionally affiliated with the center right, like I Kathimerini and To Proto Thema, and similarly TV broadcasters, such as ΧΑΙ, Star, and ΕΡΤ, largely overlapped ideologically with the established far-right media, such as the newspaper Makeleio and the TV broadcasters Kontra Channel and Extra channel, infamous for their alarmist stance, extreme xenophobia, and glorification of far-right practices. Terms like "invasion" (i.e., of migrants, of refugees, of Muslims) or " alarming situation," or the idea of Greece being "under siege," were widely used to describe both the refugee crisis and the border incidents.

In the case of the Alexis Tsipras’s government's Prespa agreement on North Macedonia's name, terms like "traitors," the idea of "selling out the country," and the strong conviction that Greek civilization is de facto superior (especially in comparison to neighbors widely described as "barbaric" or "thieves of our own history") prevailed across the media spectrum. This convergence popularized and normalized those specific representations that originate in the far-right mentality and that gradually prevailed in the public sphere.

**Military Interventions**

Even in a country with such a grim record of military intervention in politics throughout the twentieth century, literature on the contemporary far right often overlooks the armed forces. The ban on army officers publicly expressing their political views since the collapse of the junta, in 1974, surely makes it harder to research their understanding of politics and contemporary social changes. Yet there can be no doubt that far-right rhetoric overlaps with key tenets of the Greek nationalist ideology expressed by the army as an institution. On multiple core themes, army officers demonstrate a strong identification with far-right ideology.
Polling among army officers in November and December 2020 indicates their negative view of "others," whether defined in terms of ethnic or national origin, gender or religious identification. The overwhelming majority, at 92.5 percent, believe that neighboring countries (especially Turkey and North Macedonia) are hostile toward Greece, while 72.5 percent believe that Greece was "invaded" when the Turkish government opened the border to migrants at Evros in March 2020; 72.5 percent believe that Greece runs the risk of "cultural alteration"; 90 percent believe that there are too many immigrants, and 87.5 percent that immigration is related to crime; 90 percent want religious education (i.e., indoctrination in Orthodox Christian dogma) to continue in schools; and 52.5 percent oppose gay marriage, with 87.5 percent opposing child adoption by homosexual couples.

But also notable here is that those polled don't see these views as derived from far-right, exclusionary ideology: tellingly, 65 percent think that Greece is "not a racist country." Rather, they consider the defense of such positions as "a duty to the nation," expressing a "patriotism" that is today underappreciated. In a nutshell, the main point of convergence between the far right and the dominant mentality of the armed forces is an understanding of recent social changes migration, gender revolution, the transition from national uniformity to multiculturalism, and the appearance of other religions in the public sphere as a threat to the core of Greek cultural identity.

"A traditionalist view of gender relations, aggressive nationalism, and unapologetic Islamophobia figure strongly in the discourse of the Greek Orthodox Church."

Far-Right Orthodoxy

The core elements of far-right ideology pertaining to a traditionalist view of gender relations, aggressive nationalism, and unapologetic Islamophobia figure strongly in the discourse of the Greek Orthodox Church. Ever since its foundation as an independent church in 1833, it has been and remains an integral part of the state apparatus, highly influential in the legitimation and consolidation of official national ideology. Such relations of interdependence are particularly strong, given that Greece has yet to separate church and state, with the church intervening vocally on a wide range of issues, from foreign relations to immigration and school education.

However, from the 1990s onward, policy geared toward European integration which also meant the alignment of Greek laws to European requirements severely challenged the church's ideological hegemony, and a rift emerged between the church and the state. Increasingly since the 1990s, the church has taken a more conservative and aggressive turn at least on the level of official discourse, albeit with considerable deviations from this among the lower clergy.

The cultural syncretism unavoidably arising from the globalization of the economy and the influx of migrants in Greece leads a large part of the ecclesiastical body to more conservative political positions, with Islamophobia and a paranoid attitude toward alleged plots of Islamicization of the country being prominent. In this context, it is no coincidence that last year the Archbishop of Athens and All Greece Ieronymos stated in an interview that "Islam is not a religion but a political party, it has a clear political intention and [Muslim] believers are people of war." As one of this country's most influential institutions a crushing 81.4 percent majority of Greeks identify as Orthodox Christian the church's endorsement of far-right ideology troublingly normalizes these ideas.

Instrumentalizing Gender

Since the interwar years, far-right gender ideology has mainly centered on the so-called gender complementarity of sexes the ideology which keeps women "in their place" in well-defined roles, rooted in religious conservatism but also popularized and glorified by fascism and Nazism.
However, the eclectic-to-opportunistic character of these regimes led to contradictory ideologies regarding women's place in society, and Greece's dictatorships were no different. Women also assumed modern responsibilities through their involvement in the preparation of the imminent war, or in their compulsory participation in fascist mass organizations thus paving the way for an unintended break with traditional roles. This brought a new political consciousness and, for some, even a certain individual emancipation.

Recent years have seen yet another turn in this instrumental use of gender, with the convergence between a feminist and LGBT agenda and core themes of the far right. Aimed against immigration and especially Muslims accused of not accepting "our values," this creates a hybrid femonationalism and homonationalism. Since 9/11, the Euro-American political sphere has seen the rise of political figures and formations that seek to appropriate contemporary feminist and queer agendas for their own xenophobic purposes, as in the case of France's Marine Le Pen. Particular in the Greek case is that this co-optation of progressive social causes is not mobilized by the far right as expressed in Golden Dawn's traditionalist, stereotypical, and sexist imagery of masculine men and feminine women but by the mainstream right and the governing New Democracy.

Over the past two years, the right-wing government, along with more extremist voices mostly related to the Orthodox Church, have not only called for a return to traditional gender roles but also systematically appropriated identity politics. New Democracy's appointment of an openly gay politician as a deputy culture minister was a first in a country where the Left has yet to address its own patriarchal issues, as was taking a positive stance vis-à-vis the Greek #MeToo movement and rhetorically denouncing domestic violence and the wave of femicides that marked Greece in 2021.

However, women's rights along with LGBT rights are increasingly projected as endangered by the presence of immigrants and refugees, terms largely functioning as metonyms for Islam. Telling is the example of New Democracy MP Konstantinos Bogdanos (who became an independent in October 2021): while leading the attack against gender studies and academics and activists in the field, Bogdanos also depicted Muslim women's presence as unacceptable for "the dominant culture of our country as well as our legal culture," since female Islamic garments are supposedly a statement against free will and women's rights.

"The blatant misogyny and homophobia of the past is increasingly replaced by blatant xenophobia and Islamophobia."

In short, the blatant misogyny and homophobia of the past is increasingly replaced by blatant xenophobia and Islamophobia, with the newly ceded rights of women and LGBT people being predicated on a hardening of rhetoric and policies against migrant and Islamic communities. By this logic, which sees different minorities' rights as in competition, it is no surprise that 61.3 percent of Greeks think that Islam threatens the rights of women in the West. In other words, gender issues constitute the ground where we can observe the emergence of the Greek "alt-right" and a prime example of what happens when identity politics are severed from larger political stakes of equality and emancipation.

Swing to the Right

So despite the criminalization of Golden Dawn, Greece is experiencing a shift to the right, also indicative of a wider such droitisation in Europe. This radicalization is taking place on two different levels, both in society at large and in a neoliberal center moving ever further rightward.

Far-right ideas have proven extremely persistent in wider Greek society, and their corrosiveness has inflicted considerable damage on the country's body politic. While during the economic crisis Greece seemed to be at a crossroads between the Left and Right, especially with Syriza coming to power, in the long run it was conservative, if not outright reactionary, approaches that prevailed on several key issues. Syriza's failure and its reluctance to take the necessary reforms has led to great disillusionment on the progressive side of politics, facilitating the swing to the
As for the neoliberal center, despite its self-representation as the enlightened representative of Europeanism in Greece, the current New Democracy government has made a sharp authoritarian turn. It has become clear also through the tight control it exercises on the media that its ideological agenda also draws on far-right sources. In this sense, the presence in senior government roles of three key far-right figures who joined New Democracy in recent years (Adonis Georgiadis, who is today its deputy leader; Makis Voridis, the interior minister; and Thanos Plevris, the health minister) is no coincidence, for it serves the implementation of this agenda in concrete policy measures.

For years, Golden Dawn promoted fear of “cultural alteration,” a view of neighboring countries as inherently inimical to Greece, and Islamophobia, xenophobia, and racism. Today, the most worrying trend is the unawareness of the discriminatory nature of such views, which are now embedded as normal and expressed unapologetically in the guise of the mainstream right.

Source: Jacobin.

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