The far right in Greece and the theory of the two extremes

Othon Anastasakis [1] 31 May 2013

Subjects:

- International politics [2]
- Democracy and government [3]
- Culture [4]
- Conflict [5]
- Civil society [6]
- UK [7]
- Greece [8]
- Can Europe make it? [9]
- Spotlight on Greece [10]

The far right in Greece has become completely independent from the right, and is turning into a loose cannon against New Democracy rather than SYRIZA or the other parties of the centre-left.

Golden Dawn MP Panayiotis Iliopoulos, and other Golden Dawn members, are expelled from the Greek Parliament for shouting abusive language at Syriza MPs. Demotix/Panayiotis Tzamaros. All rights reserved.
The rise of the far right in Greece is becoming a grave issue and is putting the country back on front pages - this time with Golden Dawn being reported as “the mother of all far right movements in Europe”.

One after the other, the international organisations (Amnesty International, Council of Europe, European Parliament) have produced alarming reports on the implications of this new political phenomenon and ways to address the far right menace in Greece. Scholarly analyses and journalistic articles are discussing the dangers that the Golden Dawn poses to Greece’s democracy and to the stability of the political system. But beyond the much feared destabilisation of an already shaken and crisis-ridden parliamentary system, the violent and abrupt emergence of the far right brings yet another rift to Greek politics (alongside the dominant memorandum/anti-memorandum division) between right and left wing politics, where the two sides have adopted different discourses on the understanding of extremism and are advocating different ways of addressing it.

The debate on the adoption of a stringent anti-racist bill is raising the stakes and putting pressure on the governing coalition itself, as well as between government and opposition. The bill responds to international pressure and proposes among other clauses that “those who publicly, orally or through the press or the internet or any other means cause or instigate violence against a group or a person based on race, religion, heritage and sexual orientation can be imprisoned for up to six years and fined up to 20,000 euros”.

In principle, New Democracy, the right wing leading partner of the government, has chosen to adopt what could be called a “unified theory of the extremes” or what is better known as the, “theory of the two extremes” - referring to commonalities of the extremism of both right and left. Moreover, it is reluctant to accept the new bill on the grounds that most of the provisions already exist in the current legal framework and only small amendments are needed. In the opposite corner, SYRIZA, the biggest opposition party on the left, and main government contender, is the strongest opponent of the extreme right and never misses an opportunity to criticise New Democracy for being too soft on or ideologically close to Golden Dawn. It argues in favour of a strict legal framework and an end to the immunity of crimes against immigrants. The two parties of the governing coalition, PASOK (centre left) and Democratic Left (moderate left), are also alarmed by the extreme right wing parliamentary and extra-parliamentary menace and are putting pressure on ND to agree with the adoption of a more stringent anti-racist legislation.

The episode of the anti-racist bill occurs in the context of an increasingly alarming rise in neo-nazi violence and human rights abuses perpetrated by Golden Dawn which are peculiar to Greek society. But apart from the social implications, the rise of Golden Dawn is a deeply political issue which is threatening to conquer Greek parliamentary politics, given the far right party’s rising popularity (from 6.9% in the June 2012 elections to currently over 10% in the opinion polls) and if there were to be elections now, the party would most probably be the third political force in the Greek Parliament.

At the heart of the matter lies the inability of New Democracy to come to terms with the changing nature of the dominant form of extremism in Greece, an inability which often comes across as being soft on the far right. Aside from its reluctance to vote for a strictly anti-racist bill, its criticism against right-wing violence is often set in the context of the wider extremist phenomenon which already existed before the crisis and intensified afterwards. In a recent incident in parliament, when one of Golden Dawn’s MPs was forced to leave after insulting the SYRIZA leader and refusing to bring himself to order (which then resulted in a bitter row between government and opposition), the ND spokesman went so far as to accuse SYRIZA of sharing many similarities with the neo-fascist group: “The extremes are defined by their actions”, Kedikoglu said [13], “and unfortunately for SYRIZA, it has many similarities with Golden Dawn”.

There are three reasons for this over-simplification and generalisation of extremism in New Democracy perceptions: first, rational explanations of a micro-political nature and a cost-benefit analysis of expected electoral support; second, the ideological proximity between the right and extreme right; and third, historical legacies and the dominant role of left wing extremism in Greek politics since the fall of the military junta.
Micro-politics

The June 17, 2012 national elections brought about a new opposition to the government of New Democracy with SYRIZA positioning itself at the opposite polar end of Greek parliamentary politics. In all subsequent opinion polls, the two parties appear to be neck and neck, alternating at the top with a maximum of 2 percentage points of difference. Next to the memorandum/anti-memorandum schism, the existence of Golden Dawn has become the second most acute point of political division.

From a ND perspective, the “theory of the two extremes” is a potent instrument for de-legitimising the opposition party in the eyes of many mainstream voters of the centre left. By reminding them that SYRIZA is a constellation of left wing components, some of them of an anarchic and extreme left leaning, ND is attacking the Achilles’ heel of the opposition party; it exposes the latter’s vulnerability and its reluctance to openly rebuff its extremist connections. Most important, however, is New Democracy’s own drainage of voters to the extreme right, who need to be brought back.

Much like the current sucking of voters from the UK Tory party to UKIP in Britain, ND is seeing some of its most conservative protest voters drifting to their extreme right wing flank. Moreover, some of the voters who have gone over to Golden Dawn are coming from the anti-immigration LAOS party (Popular Orthodox Rally), itself a splinter group of New Democracy, which saw its electoral strength disappear during the last elections. Conservative parties across Europe and elsewhere often choose to appeal to ultra-conservative voters and they either have to cut corners in their statements or they must take up issues that are addressed by extreme right wing parties such as immigration, law and order or identity. In February 2013, 85 MPs from New Democracy signed a motion that called for anybody not of the “Greek race” to be barred from joining the country’s police and armed forces. Golden Dawn which has adopted a racial approach towards society and culture immediately supported this motion.

Ideological familiarity

But how much of this is tactical and how much is ideological? Right wing parties across Europe are big ideological families which contain tendencies from the centre-right to the extreme and ultra-conservative end of the spectrum. The Tory party of the UK is once again an interesting parallel here, whose ideology ranges from the centre right/liberal/pro-European to the extreme right/ultra-conservative/anti-European.

New Democracy in Greece has always been a party whose ideology ranged from the centre-right tolerant right to the nationalistic, anti-communist and ultra-religious right. It has always had to cater for all these different tendencies some of which included rigid ideas on the issues of nationalism, Greek Orthodox Christianity, immigration, law and order, and were propagated by conservative priests, local government nationalist circles and hard core intellectuals with extreme positions on Turkey, the Macedonian name, the interpretation of Greece’s national history, the political role of the Greek Orthodox Church. Like the UK’s conservative party, New Democracy kept its own “fundamentalists” at bay, while its ideological output was an amalgam of different conservative positions.

It is no accident that during the years of the moderate Prime Minister Kostas Karamanlis (2004-2009), New Democracy had several internal ideological fights over issues which included the Greek government’s approach to the Annan plan in Cyprus, intensity over the Macedonian name issue, internal struggles over proposed changes in the history books or allowing nationalistic voices from Northern Greece to partake in the political and cultural discourse. Interestingly when New Democracy is criticising SYRIZA and, rightly so, for allowing extremist forces into its ranks, it should see a mirror-image of its own leniency towards right-wing extremism.

Path dependency

But this approach towards extremism is not purely tactical and ideological, it also has to do with historical legacies and the heavy baggage of past extremism and its impact on today’s politics. In
Greece there is a long history of extremism in politics which started in the fierce civil war between the right and left wing of the 1940s and left its mark during the cold war years. Right wing extremism became a dominant part of the political landscape in the form of exclusionary parliamentary politics and a strong paramilitary state, which led eventually to the military dictatorship of 1967-74. Right wing extremism suffered a serious blow with the collapse of the military junta and the return to democratic politics. During the post-1974 years of reconciliation, at the initiative of Konstantinos Karamanlis’ moderate right, a new form of extra-parliamentary civil resistance grew up in Athens in the form of small but violent terrorist movements of a left-wing, anarchic, anti-American leaning which focused on well-chosen targets and were led by the November 17 organisation.

The Greek state since the 1980s was confronted with a left wing extremism which lasted until the early nineties when the government created an efficient anti-terrorist squad which effectively scuppered November 17. Even after the downfall of the November 17, however, some splinter groups remained in force and continued their city-based guerrilla warfare. Furthermore, Greek police became accustomed to extreme left wing violence during many demonstrations and protests and identified areas of high degree of surveillance in Athens, like in the region of Exarcheia. So for almost four decades Greek authorities, police and security forces kept their eye on extreme groups of the left, “the known unknowns”, while mainstream parties linked the phenomenon [15] of extremism with left-wing extra parliamentary violent politics.

A new form of extremism is born

What we are seeing today, however, is a new type of extremism, prevalent in many cities of Greece which is the outcome of the very deep economic crisis, the national loss of sovereignty and the impoverishment and rising unemployment of a large part of the population.

The neo-Nazi extreme right in Greece is a completely new phenomenon and a paradox in a country that suffered such harsh Nazi occupation during WWII. It uses old symbols and ideas, with new practices which are confusing the political system and is creating a big political headache for the main partner in the coalition government.

Golden Dawn has absolutely no relationship with the extreme left, it has a radically different ideology, uses different means of aggression and occasional offers of media-savvy assistance for “Greeks only”, and it is infiltrating state mechanisms by creating parastate apparatus that aspires to substitute itself for the state.

For ND to combat Golden Dawn requires extreme measures of an institutional, legal, political and economic nature and a clearcut rejection of its own political or ideological links. By adopting the unified theory of extremism New Democracy may be gaining marginal votes vis-à-vis SYRIZA but, at the same time, it is losing out on its own voters who will continue to head towards the extreme right.

During the past year, left-wing extremism has significantly reduced its activities and one reason for this, is SYRIZA’s meteoric electoral rise and its political embrace of its own extremist and anarchic wings. While the latter are relatively at bay and politically controlled, the far right in Greece has become completely independent from the right, and is turning into a loose canon against New Democracy rather than SYRIZA or the other parties of the centre-left. This infiltration into Greece’s state institutions and the contamination of the ideological discourse should be of prime concern to the right wing constituency in Greek politics, whose survival may in the end depend not so much on how the economic crisis or recovery develops, but on developments within the far right side of politics.

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