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The State of the Far Right in Greece

Vasiliki Georgiadou November 2019

- In the July 2019 elections, neo-Nazi Golden Dawn did not manage to secure representation in the Hellenic Parliament, whilst the new Populist Radical Right party that did get into Parliament held low electoral shares.
- In the period during which parliamentary democracy was being consolidated in Greece, the Far Right remained marginal. The Far Right was not as insignificant politically and ideologically as the numbers in the polls appeared to indicate. The ideological and organisational renewal of the Far Right started in the 1990s.
- With the outbreak of the economic crisis, bipartisanship was dramatically weakened, greatly increasing the political opportunities open to the Far Right. The rise of Golden Dawn is linked to its penetration amongst voters who had lost their ties to political parties and voted punitively.
- The institutional mobilization against the violent activism of Golden Dawn contributed to the party's marginalization. When its violent activities waned, the electoral prospects of the organisation fell drastically.
- The recovery of bipartisanship operated in two ways: restricting the political opportunities for the Far Right, but also triggering an attempt to rebuild it. The fact that mainstream parties are losing electoral support makes them susceptible to the Far Right message.



The Far Right after 1974: traits and reasons for its malaise

The rise of the European Far Right began as post-materialism was at its turning point; its presence, however became more visible in Europe after the fall of the Berlin Wall. New multicultural conditions that appeared within the nation states greatly increased the "backlash" from those who resented those changes, chiefly because they could not keep up with them (Norris & Inglehart 2019).

During that same period, the Far Right polled low numbers in Greece. In the first decades following the fall of the military dictatorship in 1974, it was on the fringes of the political scene. Quite a number of theoretical hypotheses have been formulated with respect to the "peculiarities" of the Greek case, attempting to explain why it was sidelined: vivid memories of the April junta of 1967; a non-contentious transition to democracy; and a rapid consolidation of bipartisanship were conditions that led to a large degree of electoral concentration around the two main political parties, the Centre-Right New Democracy (ND) and the Centre-Left Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK).

Immediately following the Restoration of Democracy - Metapolitefsi, as the period commencing with the change of the political system in 1974 is called - political opportunities for the Far Right were limited. With the exception of the parliamentary elections of 1977, when an "old" pro-Royal and Pro-Junta party – Ethniki Parataxi (National Alignment) - was voted into Parliament, other attempts of Far Right forces to stand independently in "first order" elections failed. However, certain movement-type configurations – National Political Union (EPEN) and the United Nationalist Movement (ENEK) did exist, with a minimal electoral foothold but with a greater presence in "street fighting" between the Far Right and the Far Left forces. (Georgiadou 2013: 87-88). The weak parliamentary representation of the Far Right during the first two decades after the restoration of democracy resulted in a large part of its forces, at both a cadre and voter level, leaving its ranks and defecting to mainstream parties.

Conditions for the renewal of the Far Right

The Far Right remained on the sidelines throughout the 1990s. Even though its electoral demand was low, new configurations kept appearing. These were political parties, such as the Greek Front (Elliniko Metopo), that adopted the ideological motifs of the "third wave" of the European Far Right: protesting against the political establishment and denouncing the elite; emphasizing matters of "law and order"; reacting against multiculturalism; opposing migration. In terms of voter demand, the 1990s were a turning point for the Greek Far Right, as this is when its internal/ideological and organisational renewal took place. The Greek Far Right of that time, without cutting loose from domestic antidemocratic and anti-parliamentary traditions, adopted the changes undergone by the European Far Right party family. As regards the latter, this was the phase in which the populist radical-right current was established. The Populist Radical Right shaped its physiognomy to reflect the idea of "nativism," according to which states must be inhabited exclusively by natives (Mudde 2007: 26, 18-19).

With the advent of the new millennium, new political opportunities arose for the Greek Far Right. The matter of the name of the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM); the clash of the (PASOK) government and the Orthodox Church over stating religious affiliation on state identity cards; and Greece's accession to the EMU, which "locked in" a European orientation for Greece, were matters that triggered voters' nationalist reflexes. In this new reality, Greek bipartisanship appeared less polarized and the mainstream parties moved closer to each other. This fact increased the political opportunities for the parties that vied for a position on the margins of the political system.

At the same time, a second migration flow towards Greece, with incoming populations from Muslim and African countries, stirred up xenophobic sentiment. The nativist motifs employed by the Far Right could, up to a point, satisfy the demand for ethnocentric political options. Such motifs could respond to issues (such as criminality, security) that were raised by voters and over which mainstream political parties were unable to demonstrate "ownership" and the ability to manage



them. Moreover, the Far Right narrative operated as a conveyor belt for voters' disenchantment with or rage against the political elite, whom the citizens blamed for their grievances.

The neo-Nazi movement of the Far Right: Golden Dawn

The Far Right in Greece gained electoral traction starting in the early 2000s. Its rise occurred under socio-economic conditions of both prosperity and the vulnerability that prevailed with the outbreak of the economic crisis. In discussions of the Far Right in Greece, interest is focused on developments seen from 2010/2012 onwards, when a neo-Nazi formation, the Popular Association – Golden Dawn (GD) – managed to gain representation in Greek Parliament. The fact that GD took third place in the two national elections in 2015 (January and September) demonstrated the electoral relevance that a deeply antidemocratic party can acquire.

In terms of typology, GD belongs to the extremist Far Right formations, with its ideological credo classifying it as a neo-Nazi movement. An examination of GD's practices reveals that it is not an organization with typical party-like characteristics. The way that it is organised brings to mind a "militia-like party" (Duverger 1963), whose characteristics are similar to that of a paramilitary organization in which Hitler's "leader's principle" (Führerprinzip) prevails: the Leader demands absolute obedience and has complete control and command of the organisation. Such organizations perpetrate acts of violent activism, as GD did systematically, putting specific groups in its sights: migrants and refugees, Muslims, people of colour, Jews, LGBTQ community members. Based on the violent incidents recorded (Galariotis et al. 2017; Georgiadou & Rori 2019), dozens of events have been identified as involving GD, where it targeted both people and physical objects related to the aforementioned groups.

The rise and fall of far-right extremism

Many hypotheses have been formulated with respect to the causes of the meteoric electoral rise of GD, which multiplied its power between general elections held in October 2009 (in which it received 0.29% of the votes) and May 2012 (in which it received 6.97%). Meanwhile, we have to seek the causes for its fall, as in the recent general elections (July 2019) it failed to even get into Parliament.

Upward fluctuations in GD's electoral demand have been associated with the outbreak of the crisis and the signing of the loan agreements between Greek governments (Fiscal Adjustment Programmes) and the European Commission, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund. The Adjustment Programmes (Memoranda) were regarded by parts of the electoral body as an "abandonment" of national sovereignty and contributed to the collapse of bipartisanship. As the established political parties lost face, GD cultivated its own idea of a "nationalist solution" that would bring about "national rebirth" (Vasilopoulou and Halikiopoulou 2015). This prospect somewhat veiled its neo-Nazi character, at least for voters who did not espouse the party's neo-Nazi ideas and violent practices.

The rise of GD was also aided by its strategy of creating "strongholds" within Greece (Georgiadou 2013). The organization deployed dense local activism practices to gain visibility, influence and/or representation in specific areas, chiefly within the centre of Athens and Piraeus, but as active as the organization was in its strongholds, it remained invisible on a national level. When, in 2012, GD made its debut on a national level, its entry into the electoral arena was portrayed as a "surprise," which was a misleading characterization, as it had had a local presence and been represented on the capital's city council since 2010. Over time, its activism waned and its electoral percentages fell. This development was linked with the judicial investigation into GD and the indictment of its leader and a large number of leading members on the charge of participating in a criminal organisation.

The suspension of state funding that had preceded the beginning of the trial also was a factor in limiting GD's activism: as the organization's economic resources fell, so did the number of "social policy" racist actions carried out by GD in distributing food (which were "hate soup kitchens") or organizing blood donation



campaigns "only for Greeks" (Dinas et al. 2016). In this way the organization attempted to gain traction with those on the losing side of the crisis – in other words, the economically vulnerable groups that had lost their ties to political parties and who sought to vote punitively. Besides economic vulnerability, a set of attitudes (authoritarianism, political cynicism) also played an important role and, when adopted by the voters, created availability in favour of GD.

The Populist Radical Right: characteristics and political opportunities

The crisis in bipartisanship emerged from the outcry against the Adjustment Programmes and created upheavals not only in the competition between parties, but also within the party configurations themselves. The case of Independent Greeks (ANEL) falls under this category, as it is a political party whose leader and cadres had been part of ND. At least initially (ANEL was established in 2012), but also mainly due to their coalition government with SYRIZA (2015 - 2019), certain concerns were raised regarding its classification as a far right party. Taking into account its official texts, speeches in parliament and public interventions, ANEL fulfils the "minimal" and "maximum definition" of Far Right. Speaking from a purely spatial standpoint, based on its positions on the Left-Right spectrum, ANEL is right wing - further to the right than ND. ANEL's narrative is studded with elements of nationalism and populism, which are further complemented by ideological motifs such as opposition to migration, mixed with xenophobia and Islamophobia, homophobia, veiled anti-Semitism and conspiracy theories. Despite its electoral strength in the double elections of May and June 2012 (they received 10.6% and 7.5%, respectively), ANEL followed a downward course (receiving 0.8% in the European Parliament elections in May 2019) and did not even participate in the most recent parliamentary elections.

The revival of bipartisanship (in recent elections, the party in power and the main opposition party accounted for 71.4% of the votes) is a signal that conditions are favourable for a shift in voters from the extremes of the political spectrum to more conventional political choices. In the parliamentary elections held on July 7th,

2019, almost a quarter of GD voters in May's European Parliament elections shifted towards ND, SYRIZA and the newly-established Greek Solution. Based on how Greeks voted in the September 2015 parliamentary elections, in July 2019 30% of former GD voters chose one of the three aforementioned parties, with the lion's share going to ND and Greek Solution (Exit Poll, 7.7.2019).

What does the shrinking pool of GD voters – which left the party without representation in parliament and cut back its local presence – mean for the broader area of the Far Right?

Even though GD did not emerge from the reservoir of the Populist Radical Right forces, former voters of the Populist Radical Right parties did vote for it (Dinas et al. 2016). Moreover, Greek Solution may not be the other side of the same coin in relation to GD, but its links with the Populist Radical Right milieu are strong. In the following section the focus will be on this area, concentrating on the "forerunners" (LAOS) that functioned as a mould, as well as on the "successors" (Greek Solution) that followed in the footsteps of the populist radical version of the Far Right.

From LAOS to Greek Solution: the rise, the fall and the attempt to rebuild the Far Right

Popular Orthodox Rally (LAOS) was established in 2000. An offshoot of ND, LAOS was formed and led by Giorgios Karatzaferis, who had been an MP for ND until ND's shift towards the middle ground. As a member of parliament for ND, Giorgos Karatzaferis represented the ideological trend that flirted with the Far Right. The then president of ND, Kostas Karamanlis, a nephew of the party's founder, decided to expel Karatzaferis from ND shortly after the parliamentary election of April 2000, severing the link with this ideological branch of the party. Karamanlis's decision finalized ND's shift towards the middle ground, despite the negative stance taken by the intraparty "people's Right" against such a reorientation of ND. On the other hand, with the creation of LAOS, its leader wanted to put across the message that the new political party spoke for not only the "people" of the "populist Right," but also for the "working and



grass-roots" classes and the "Orthodox Greek people" overall, unlike the "new" ND and the other political parties, which look to the elites and are subject to the "New World Order" (Ellinas 2010). The key motto of LAOS's leader was, "you're either for globalisation or for patriotism," as he invoked the "dehellinisation" and "oppression" of Greece by a "rotten establishment" as the main reasons for the creation of his political party (newspaper Alpha Ena, 13.9.2014).

With its creation, LAOS appropriated the motifs of the populist radical version of the Far Right: as distilled in the trifecta of nativism / authoritarianism / populism that characterizes the Populist Radical Right parties (Mudde 2007). Despite changes to its ideological / political features, throughout its course LAOS preserved these motifs intact. However, when LAOS first appeared it espoused more pointed irredentist and anti-immigrant positions, which the party later polished in an effort to camouflage its ideological identity and become less abrasive in some of its positions. Even though the party was within the realm of radical ethnopopulism, it networked with the anti-Semitic and neo-Nazi milieu of the Far Right. In the very first election in which LAOS participated (regional elections, 2002), it included GD cadres on its electoral lists, a choice which demonstrated an osmosis of the popular-radical and extremist/neo-Nazi version of the Far Right.

LAOS started gaining significant ground in the 2004 European Parliament elections (in which it received 4.1% of the vote), a trend which continued in the national elections of 2007 and 2009 (where it received 3.8% and 5.6% of the vote, respectively) and culminated in the 2009 European Parliament elections (receiving 7.1% of the vote). A significant portion of its support came from voters who were against the Establishment and blamed the political parties and the government for their plight (Georgiadou et al. 2012). Those who rejected placement on the Left-Right spectrum flocked to LAOS, and amongst such voters the party garnered twice as many votes as it did among voters as a whole. In 2012, when it participated in a pro-European government of technocrats headed by the former Vice-President of the European Central Bank, Loukas Papadimos - a choice that negated its previous anti-establishment position - LAOS embarked on its unceasing downward spiral in terms of votes. Even though it was sidelined in all subsequent elections (and was unable to pass the 3% threshold in elections after 2012), it cannot be termed an "ephemeral party," i.e. a party that did not leave a mark on the party system (Stanley 2017). LAOS may be regarded as a "forerunner," as key points of its agenda would be adopted by the domestic Populist Radical Right. Political cadres of the Far Right were able to emerge from its milieu and establish new communication practices: LAOS was a "mediatized TV party" (Psarras 2010) that had its own radio/television channels, and its leader had his own live television show, forging a more direct relationship with viewers/voters.

The crisis that arose in the political scene of the Greek Far Right when LAOS and GD lost ground and were sidelined in the elections galvanized its cadres and renewed the prospect of "rebuilding" the Far Right milieu in the Greek party arena. This prospect included the creation of National Unity (Ethniki Enotita), which focused on issues of security and migration, aspiring to forge an alliance of parties belonging to a "purebred" right wing. Greek Solution was established along similar lines, with the prospect of forming a party in which different movements within the Greek Far Right could merge. Characteristically, key figures of the Far Right took on the "rebuilding" endeavour - supported, however, by players who operated in the grey area between the established (Centre) Right and the Far Right. This mosaic of players signalled the effort made to "rebuild" the Far Right, staking a claim over a large part of the right wing pole, extending both ways and penetrating into portions of both the mainstream Right and the extreme Right.

In this "rebuilding" attempt, Greek Solution (founded in 2016) was the only political party that appeared in the Far Right arena after the collapse of GD to secure parliamentary representation in both the European Parliament elections in May 2019 and the national elections that ensued, with 4.2% (one seat) and 3.7% (ten seats) of the vote, respectively. Greek Solution portrays itself as both a movement and a political party, whose mission is to provide "solutions for Greece." Even though, verbally, its leader distances himself from the strongly Nazi ideological motifs of GD and rejects its violent practices, it is nevertheless impressive that he does not



agree with the indictment of GD members. Velopoulos characterised their arrest as a "fiasco" and "nonsense" perpetrated by the "domestic government and judicial system," not ruling out that it may have been dictated by "powers outside of Greece" (Psarras 2019: 41-42).

In the profile of Greek Solution, the following motifs that are central to the Populist Radical Right version of the Far Right can be discerned: i) speaking out against the elites and opposing the "corrupt party system," a "dirty system that sucks Greece's life blood"; ii) deploying national priority as its banner: the slogan "Greeks First" was cited continuously in the official party material, which included a proposal for a "strict migration policy" in which Greece shall be a "fortress" without migrants; and iii) establishing a "dynamic democracy," instead of a "static" parliamentarian democracy, which shall operate via referenda and institutions, "whereby political power will be freed from financial control," (see its Founding Declaration¹ and Party Platform²).

Greek Solution is distinguished for its strong propensity for conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theories, in combination with fake news, are often propagated by its leader. Greek Solution is a mediatized party, with its leader having been present on minor TV channels for decades, often with his own show. Kyriakos Velopoulos addresses those voters who believe that the established elites ignore them and that mass media mislead them by hiding the "truth," whilst the TV shows of Greek Solution's leader strike them as "revealing" and "anti-systemic." These are shows which depend on conjecture and conspiracy scenarios focusing on Greece, which is portrayed as being targeted on all sides by foreign cabals and secret forces. These shows risk-monger by reproducing stereotypes, but further aim to offer "explanations" that appear truthful and indicate "solutions" for the salvation of Greece. Such "solutions" include an alliance with Vladimir Putin and a shift towards Orthodox Russia to forge trade and cultural relations, which - according to Greek Solution's party manifesto will enable Greece to overcome its economic problems. Velopoulos sought to capitalize on the pro-Russian sentiment prevalent in large swaths of Greek society. To gain the support of a religious audience, he cultivates a The nationalist populist agenda of pro-Russia Greek Solution, spearheaded by its denunciation of the Prespes Agreement, increased the number of its followers in areas of Northern Greece, where reactions against the Agreement were strongest. It is therefore no surprise that the party's strongholds can be found in Northern Greece. As regards the social demographics of its voters, Greek Solution has a greater share than the national average amongst men, pensioners and people with a low and medium educational level (Exit Poll, 7.7.2019).

pro-Russian profile and lets it be understood that he has

ties with the Russian government (which was indirectly

but clearly refuted by the Russian Embassy in Greece).

Summary - Conclusions

In the period during which parliamentary democracy was being consolidated in Greece, the Far Right drew low electoral shares. At that time, Populist Radical Right parties had begun to gain ground in many European countries. However, the Greek Far Right was not as insignificant politically and ideologically as the numbers in the polls appeared to indicate. In the 1990s the Greek Far Right went on to renew itself from an ideological and organizational perspective, even though its penetration in the electorate remained limited. However, the conditions that kept the Far Right on the margins of the party scene no longer apply: memories of the military dictatorship have faded, the charismatic leaders that rallied voters to the established parties in the 1970s and the 1980s are now in the past, and voters are volatile and likely to switch between different or even dissimilar parties. Bipartisanship, the hallmark of Greece's party system, did not provide the optimum conditions for the rise of third parties. However, it was dramatically weakened by the outbreak of the financial crisis, in which economic, socio-cultural and political grievances abounded, instigating demand for Far Right parties. In the midst of the crisis, new configurations emerged at the Far Right-wing pole. This period was primarily characterized by the meteoric rise of the neo-Nazi GD, which employed violent activism in seeking support from the pool of voters who sought revenge, maintaining a cynical stance towards the mainstream parties and the political elites.

^{1.} Founding Declaration: https://elliniki-lisi.gr/idritiki-diakiriksi

 $^{2.\} Party\ Platform:\ https://elliniki-lisi.gr/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/programma.eliniki.lisi_.2019.v3.pdf$



The end of the financial crisis triggered Greece's return to a two-party hegemony. This is a process that signals the beginning of a new phase of democratic stability - surmounting the party fragmentation which has become commonplace in many European countries and serves as a breeding ground for Populist Radical and Eurosceptic parties (Mudde 2019). The resurgence of two-party dominance at the end of the financial crisis limited the political opportunities for the domestic Far Right to remain on the political stage. This fact, combined with the reaction of the institutions (Parliament, media, courts) to the neo-Nazi milieu of the Far Right, curtailed the thrust of the extremist component, as can be seen by the shrinking electoral shares of GD and its ostracism from Parliament. However, part of the electorate - voters who have become disenchanted with the political parties - remains available to support party configurations that deploy conspiracy theories, superstition and denunciations of the Establishment, giving the impression that they are going against the current and opposing the "mighty."

The trivialization of Far Right ultranationalist ideas provides fertile ground for their rise. Faced with falling electoral support, mainstream parties have become susceptible to the Far Right message. With a view to regaining voters who have switched to the Far Right or remain undecided and could swing either way, Centerright and Center-left parties are trying to adjust their message, making it more compatible with the Far Right narrative. The Prespes Agreement (2019) was an issue that motivated Center-right New Democracy and Center-left KINAL (Movement for Change) to adopt much tougher positions than those they had supported a few years earlier. The refugee crisis is another issue that prompted ND to propose more rigid immigration policies in order to stem the loss of voters.

In the 2012 double "earthquake" elections, parties of the Center-left and the Center-right lost a significant number of their voters, most of whom opted to switch to the Radical Left (SYRIZA), the Independent Greeks or GD. The fact that neither ANEL nor GD got into Parliament, while Greek Solution failed to attract a significant number of voters, creates new opportunities for established parties to bring former Far Right voters back into the mainstream party fold. As quite a number

of the motifs of the Far Right repertoire were adopted by configurations outside the Far Right party family, the target of bringing errant voters back into the fold appears to be attainable. However, this runs the risk of legitimizing the Far Right agenda: voting for Far Right parties may become commonplace, with the same voters easily reclaimed by mainstream parties, and – vice versa – voters of mainstream parties may become less averse to anti-establishment or entirely antisystemic parties (Nakou 2019).

The Far Right across Europe has undergone a certain level of "normalization," becoming a potential electoral choice amongst other electoral options. It remains to be seen whether such a choice will become more popular in the conditions taking shape in Greece, now that the country has emerged from the financial crisis.



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