

Mapping Ultra-Right Extremism, Xenophobia and Racism within the Greek State Apparatus

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Abstract

WHY THIS STUDY?

A year and a half ago, in October 2012, when this work started, the context was different. Opinion polls showed Golden Dawn solidifying the support of a double-digit share of the electorate. The police were accused of collaborating with or at best tolerating Golden Dawn. The government strongly denied the problem and did not hesitate to admonish critics who said otherwise. When a major British newspaper raised accusations of official tolerance of Golden Dawn¹, it was threatened with a lawsuit by the Greek Minister of Public Order and Citizen Protection, who now leads the hunt against Golden Dawn. Confounding standards of rule of law, the judiciary seemed little concerned with the crimes perpetrated by members of the organization. It was not only that cases involving members of Golden Dawn dragged on indefinitely. Greek judges also refused tenaciously to do what they now find simple: to connect these criminal acts in a comprehensive prosecution strategy. What the authorities have done in recent months, all too easily yet all too belatedly, is to designate Golden Dawn as a “criminal” organization under the relevant article of the Greek Penal Code. The great victory of the Greek Nazi organization had been in the fear it inspired, but Greek society was fearful because the Greek State did not seem willing to confront the issue. Official inaction was neither a matter of political neutrality nor a product of bureaucratic indifference. It was in part related to the fact that certain affinities were hard to cover up. Naturally these affinities, within the Greek political apparatus itself, tend to appear to varying degrees and different ways.

- **The Church**

In autumn 2012, when the bishop of Piraeus joined the Golden Dawn vice-chief in a legal filing against “blasphemous” theater actors, some were worried and some protested, but none seemed ready to take serious action, notwithstanding the political parties of the Left and a few human rights organizations. The Church, an inextricable participant in public power, a virtual State within the State, never practically underwent a process of political cleansing during the Greek transition period after 1974 (the “Changeover”), as the public administration did. As a result, even senior Church officials traditionally seem to lack any scruple about stating views

¹See <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/oct/09/greek-antifascist-protesters-torture-police>

that, under the strict standards of European anti-hate speech law, would be subject to prosecution. As a matter of fact, a few months ago, when the adoption of an anti-hate speech law was under discussion in Greece, Greek Orthodox priests were all over private TV talk shows, trying to convince the public and the believers that “nobody can contain God’s speech”. At the same time, it is interesting to note that the archbishop has not opposed the prospect of such legislation introduced to Greek law, and would most likely be relieved to welcome a few restrictions on the public speech of certain Greek bishops. The special position of the Greek Orthodox Church within the Greek State and its close ties with public authorities have not served as a factor of self-censorship against stating such views and reproducing such ideological perceptions within the Church, and have instead functioned in a rather unforeseen way. In making full use of the privileges accorded to them, Church officials actually feel empowered to speak out on just about any political matter in sometimes surprisingly interventionist ways. The decentralized administrative model of the Greek Orthodox Church (at least compared to the Roman Catholic church) enables individual Church officials not only to say practically whatever they like, but also to form coalitions with ultra-right political strategies, either because they feel this is a good way to consolidate their presence and power among the clergy, or simply because they really think this is the right thing to do. The result is that some Greek priests have successfully claimed a vital space within political discourse from which they do not underplay but consciously uphold an ultra-right political orientation. In this sense, the speech of the Church is very easy to penetrate, because it does not bother to hide. On the other hand, a very different situation evidently obtains with the police, and even more so with the military and the judiciary.

- **Judiciary**

Obviously, one should not expect Greek judges to manifestly express their political beliefs, especially when these follow ultra-right patterns. This does not happen and normally could not happen in Greece, although there are some unfortunate exceptions in this sphere as well. What does happen and is worthy of consideration and study is that within the judiciary there is a constant and systematic reproduction of practices and judgments that are especially favourable to the consolidation of an ultra-right political culture and ideology, and emphatically disseminate it within society. The most crucial issue is not the ideological crystallization of extremely reactionary normative judgments and their systematic pronouncement; in the final analysis, this could be also attributed to the conservative functions performed by any judicial system, anywhere and at any time. The problem is that both in cases that are emblematic for the Greek society and political system, and in cases that are publicly irrelevant, the judiciary seems to increasingly slide towards judgments that reproduce dominant nationalist and racist views in a punitive way. The counter-argument here is that one should not expect judges not to be “ordinary people”, since such views are widespread in Greece across the political spectrum, and not just in ultra-right settings. In any case, judges are people too and are entitled to have the views that they prefer. The fact that some of them endorse racist views and pronounce racist judgments is naturally of concern. But the most interesting thing is not what judges think, but that some judges make their own ideology into a

normative rule, more often than not in a blatant and partial way, favouring one side of the political spectrum. This is why we do believe that the Greek judiciary is the main issue of this study of Greece today. This is not to say that the judiciary poses an exceptional danger to democracy, but that it reproduces judgments and views that consolidate a culture that may be convincingly shown to share most features of the ultra-right as the normative horizon (i.e., as the common view of what is just) of the Greek political community.

- **Police**

As for the Hellenic Police, and notwithstanding the results of recent judicial and disciplinary actions taken against its officials (whether high-ranked or not) as part of the effort to dismantle Golden Dawn, the present study finds it represents the sector of the State that is by far the most exposed to ultra-right intrusion. This, of course, should not come as a surprise, although today even the most sceptical observer may feel abashed by the degree to which the Hellenic Police is contaminated with Nazi enclaves. The very phrase “police erosion” is a commonplace even in mainstream currents of public speech, while confessions by the highest political actors have become common. Interestingly enough, not a single minister of public order during the crucial last three years has failed to admit in public (but only after his incumbency) that there is indeed a major problem. Perhaps the one exception here is, to our knowledge, the only minister of public order in Greece since 1974 who was himself a former police official, during the “experts’ government” under Loukas Papadimos (late 2011 to early 2012). This could be attributed either to a strong *esprit de corps* towards his service, to a lack of political cynicism compared to all his other colleagues, or maybe to a combination of both.

- **The Army**

Due to the recent 20th century history of constitutional aberrations in Greece, the military takes on a relatively even greater historical and political significance in the context of our study. Twentieth century Greek political history constitutes a paradigmatic model of repeated interventions by the military in politics in coup d'état strategies of ultra-right inspiration and anti-communist ideology. Precisely because of this legacy, the Greek military since 1974 has displayed an exemplary behaviour of constitutional faith. Both its position within the State and its historical legacy do not leave any doubt about its faith in the Constitution. Indeed, this study shows that the military follows rather convincingly a recommended institutional approach regarding its position within the Greek State. However, even here there are cracks, and increasingly so as of late. Obviously, it goes without saying that ultra-right stains within the military (“droplets”, according to Evangelos Averoff’s famous formulation soon after 1974) never altogether disappeared or evaporated; nor could they. The deep ultra-right stains within the military were instead covered up and ultra-right voices were hushed. The transition to democracy and the consolidation of democracy after 1974 have assured that the only institutionally recommended voice of the military lies in institutional silence. This has held until the present day, but with progressive bumps now at a high point, as seen in the chapter on the military.

As the crisis progresses ever further in Greece, an increasing number of military officers, including high-ranked ones, seem to slide, sometimes overtly, towards a view of the “salvation of the country” from a double enemy: first and foremost, an external one, which, as Greek nationalism is keen on repeating, lurks whenever “our homeland is weak”; and, second, an internal one naturally bearing the features selected by those who imagine it.

These are the subjects treated and documented in the present study.

THE TURNING POINT OF AUTUMN 2013: FROM PUBLIC SILENCE TO TRIUMPHANT CONFESSION

The assassination of Pavlos Fyssas, as an outcome of previous events, became a catalyst for crucial developments regarding the position of Golden Dawn on the Greek political map. To put it simply: even the political right wing felt unsettled because they saw that, even as Golden Dawn was claiming to give hegemonic expression to the country’s traditional circles of extreme conservatism, it now posed a real threat to social peace. In the autumn of 2013, at the moment when these lines were first written, the limits were reached in the Greek Republic’s until-then unjustifiable and unbearable tolerance towards its imminent enemy. Golden Dawn was too obviously revealed as a criminal organization combining national socialist ideology with mafia practices, until then unperturbed in spreading the seed of violence and toxic ideology within Greek society; a part of which seemed well-disposed to adopt its message.

A number of different reasons have been given to explain the political consolidation of this organization. Some observers, in a quite one-sided way, point to Greek immigration policy as the sole cause. Of course this policy, which constitutes a total State failure, has something to do with it. Others speak rather abstractly about the predominance of nationalism in Greek political culture, or the historical depths of the ultra-right’s intrusion into the Greek state. Still others blame the Memorandums and the economic crisis for everything. But this is no one-sided matter, and it would be a mistake to attribute Golden Dawn’s rise wholly to one factor. The political right finds it convenient to blame immigration for everything, thus pandering to its conservative electorate. Some centre-left intellectuals and parts of the political centre, supporters of the “modernization” of yore, think that bad nationalism is to blame for everything. Parts of the political left blame it on the Memorandums. And yet... it is naturally true that Golden Dawn would not have come this far if it were not for the crisis afflicting the country since 2009. The crisis was a catalyst, however, and not the cause. It is also naturally true that immigration has led many people to despair and resentments that have been thoroughly exploited by the ultra-right, in Greece as elsewhere in Europe. Finally, it is naturally true that crude “underdog” Greek nationalism, sometimes adopted even by parts of the left, has served to intoxicate the minds of many. All these factors have something to do with the current situation of the country with regard to Golden Dawn, but it is false to present any of them as single causes. Notwithstanding the pending results of the criminal prosecution of the organization and the ongoing effort at dismantlement, the Greek State and society have a lot more work to do in order to give a convincing and sustainable political answer to the social, political and

economic conditions that engendered Nazism in 21st century Greece. Even if the criminal organization is eventually dismantled, even if its ties with the State are restrained or cut off, the part of Greek society that has expressed itself through Golden Dawn will continue looking for a political outlet.

This study does not cover ultra-right political culture in Greece in a general way, nor even Golden Dawn per se, but poses a simpler question: How is to be explained that Golden Dawn is being treated by the State as another organization in the mould of the “17 November” group, despite the obvious fact that the latter, quite unlike Golden Dawn, only operated for many years under cover of darkness and illegality? What are the ties, the inactions, the ideological or other mechanisms that for so long prevented the Greek State from doing its job with respect to an organization now all-too easily characterized as “criminal” under the relevant article of the penal code? For example, why must the minister in charge first issue an order to the leadership of the Supreme Court before a criminal investigation can even begin? In the famous conclusion by the deputy public prosecutor at the Supreme Court, one reads that all it took to begin the recent anti-Golden Dawn mobilization was for a document to be sent over by the minister of public order and citizen protection (the latter being, again, the same person who a year earlier had announced his intent to sue *The Guardian* for the newspaper’s article on the torture of anarchists by police officers with Golden Dawn sympathies or affiliations). The prosecution was also prompted by *“a number of articles in various newspapers regarding the activities of the party Popular Association – Golden Dawn, which, according to the aforementioned ministerial report, exceed the limits of single events, provoke public morals, undermine the authority of the rule of law, offend human rights and human dignity, endanger public order and the country’s internal security, and expose its democratic tradition and its legal culture as well as its obligations emanating from international and European law...”*

Why, then, did we have to reach that point? This is what the present study tries to explain, especially today, at a time when things appear to be changing. This study, again, was conceived and conducted before the turning point of autumn 2013, during the long period of State inaction attesting to acquiescence or even affiliation. This inaction was unbearable not simply because the criminal acts now being pursued in court are only a fraction of those that were actually perpetrated. Even more telling is that until recently the State made no effort to connect these crimes and to expose their organized and systematic character, although many loud and clear voices within Greek society were exposing the ugly reality through a series of books, analyses, reports, countless video documents, and political confessions. Additionally there were reports on racist violence by watchdog groups, ample coverage in the international press, and international expressions of concern about developments in Greece, where society appeared to be on the verge of open domestic conflict. From the other side, public immunity afforded much space for revealing expressions of racist hatred on the Web, disgusting statements in the Parliament, Nazi salutes, etc. All this did not require demonstration: it was commonly known and commonly experienced.

What then are the emblematic moments of culmination and what are the subjects around which ultra-right pockets formed within the Greek State? How are these pockets interrelated, how do they reinforce each other? Are there

mechanisms of communication among them? Where does ultra-right ideology seem to be most deeply rooted? To what degree did the “dejuntaization” after 1974 affect the structures of the parastate? Did it succeed in dissolving or silencing these? What was the effect of the accession of the socialist/centre-left party PASOK to power in 1981? What were the crucial moments that changed the scenery during the 1990s? How does the surrounding political culture reflect itself in the fluctuations of ultra-right extremism within the State? Can we document through political research that the rise in racism and xenophobia against immigrants in Greece served to legitimate or remobilize ultra-right extremism within the State? Are we dealing with the familiar offspring of post-civil war Greece, or with something altogether new? At some point, a discussion started about the “deep state” in Greece. What exactly is this? Again, is it something new and discrete, or a variation on something old?

Ultra-right ideology is deeply rooted in Greek political history. A major part of Greek political culture is based on a compact and continuous background of totalitarianism and authoritarianism. Let us not forget that in the last century Greece has seen more constitutional aberrations than any other supposedly comparable European country. This is a country where the appeal to “danger” has always functioned as a pretext for the abrogation of constitutions and guarantees on liberties, with Greek security forces and the military in the vanguard of such abolitions. Forty years have passed since the transition of 1974, and yet these are not enough to forget the parastate of a “sickly” republic, according to an apt characterization of the Greek Republic.

Constituted power in Greece has developed vigorous romances with the ultra-right, which though intermittent seem to endure, as the following pages will show. The military, the church, the judiciary and the police have been the “great nodes of anti-communism”, eminent branches of a “national and ideological” State such as the Greek one was for the major part of its trajectory in the 20th century. In our harsh times, certain pockets within these State apparatuses wish to reconstitute the old romance. The impunity granted to Nazi violence, whether as a product of tolerance due to affiliation or of distance due to fear, is truly without precedent in the European context and enables the recent revival fuelled by the despair and anger of the Greek people. Let us not forget that the flagrantly bigoted speech of State officials, which would promptly activate the penal code in other European countries, and the total lack of accountability for this, have also fed Nazism. What is there to say, when in the spring of 2013 a government led by New Democracy passed an “anti-racist” bill that explicitly excluded all State officials from criminal responsibility for hate speech?

As long as Greece continues as a stigmatized country along a socially painful path of neoliberal restructuring, the threat of fascistization cannot be considered to have been repulsed just because of the current effort to dismantle Golden Dawn. The Greek Republic degenerates along with the dismantlement of organized labour in a society that suffers. Let the following pages be read not just as evidence for mapping the ultra-right within the Greek State, but primarily as evidence of the pressing need to develop a different strategy for resetting the country.