

# The Greek Elections of 2012: The Worrisome Rise of the Golden Dawn

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On June 17, 2012, eighteen members of *Chrysi Avgi* [Golden Dawn] were sworn into the *Boule ton Ellenon* [Greek parliament] (in comparison to the twenty-one seats in the 300-member parliament that it won in the first round of Greek elections six weeks earlier on May 6, 2012). In so doing, it has arguably become not only the most extreme right-wing political party to have won parliamentary seats in Europe in recent years, but also among the most extreme to have entered a European national legislature since Nazi-era Germany.<sup>1</sup>

Golden Dawn was a fringe movement when founded in the early 1980s and remained so until three years ago. In the 2009 elections, it garnered a meager 0.23 percent of the vote (below the 3 percent threshold required to enter parliament). In 2010, it won a seat on the Athens City Council and in the June 2012 election it received 6.92 percent of the national vote—thus becoming the fifth largest party currently in the parliament.<sup>2</sup> Its popularity has soared ever since. A September 2012 poll indicated that 22 percent of Greeks had positive views of Golden Dawn, up from 12 percent in May. According to an October poll, if elections were held soon, Golden Dawn would gain no less than 14 percent of the vote, making it Greece's third-largest party.<sup>3</sup>

Greek Prime Minister Antonis Samaras described Golden Dawn as “a right-wing extremist, one might say Fascist, neo-Nazi party.”<sup>4</sup> The rise of the party parallels the rise of other such groups in twentieth-century European history—which makes it all the more worrisome.

The purpose of this survey is to explain the threat posed by Golden Dawn not only to the democratic stability of Greek society, embroiled as it is in a financial crisis the likes of which no EU member-state has ever witnessed, but why it should be of concern to Europe as a whole.

The near collapse of the Greek state's socioeconomic credibility enabled a marginal group to move to the center of the political scene. Moreover, it exploited the security void and presented itself as a support network for Greeks at a time

when national institutions were receding or even totally absent. For years, the Greek political system ignored the issue of illegal immigration until there were so many foreigners that the confrontation with locals and a wave of crime became inevitable.<sup>5</sup> Acts of violence have become systematic and organized. Golden Dawn targeted foreigners under the pretext of guaranteeing public safety. Brutal attacks and hate crimes, which are racially motivated, have become a common phenomenon.

As of August 15, 2012, the Greek criminal justice system has not convicted a single perpetrator of any violent racial attack. This, combined with the victims' own fears (they often lack documents legalizing their presence in the country), their reticence to file complaints with the competent police authorities, and the inability of the law enforcement authorities to carry out arrests contribute to the vicious cycle of violence.<sup>6</sup>

Worse still is that Golden Dawn is increasingly assuming the role of law enforcement on the streets. There is growing evidence that Athenians are being openly directed by police to seek help from that party.<sup>7</sup> Golden Dawn has established an expansive social outreach program that provides services to the elderly in crime-ridden areas and distributes food and clothing to the needy. It also set up branches among diaspora Greek communities and opened offices in New York, Montreal, and, recently, Italy. The branches send aid to the party headquarters in Athens, which distributes it to local citizens. But that assistance comes at a price: allegiance to Golden Dawn. Victims of crime who were told by the police that they should turn to the party felt obliged to support Golden Dawn, even if they did not wholeheartedly support its ideology. Similarly, a Greek political analyst explained the relationship between the police and Golden Dawn, saying that many of the policemen are apolitical and consider Golden Dawn supporters to be their allies in clashes with leftists and anarchists. In the two rounds of elections, as much as 50 percent of the police force voted for Golden Dawn.<sup>8</sup> In an interview published in the Greek newspaper *To Vima* in mid-July 2012, the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, Nils Muiznieks, called for close scrutiny of the alleged links between the police and Golden Dawn. When referring to the party, he said it was the "most overtly extremist and Nazi party in Europe."<sup>9</sup>

While advocating an anti-immigrant platform, Golden Dawn has been engaged in anti-immigrant actions in downtown Athens, where the number of illegal immigrants, mainly from South Asia, Albania, Africa, and now Syria, has skyrocketed. With its aim of expelling foreigners from Greece, the party adopted the slogans: "Rid this land of filth" and "Greece for Greeks," and has even proposed planting mines along Greek borders to prevent the entry of immigrants. The more than 1.5 million immigrants presently in Greece account for approximately

10 percent of its population.<sup>10</sup> With extensive coastlines and easily crossable borders, Greece has become a gateway to the European Union. Eighty percent of the refugees arriving in the European Union pass through Greek ports, making it the EU's busiest transit point for illegal immigration.<sup>11</sup> Greece's geography, along with the EU regulation that allows member states to return illegal immigrants and asylum seekers to the country in which they first entered Europe, "have turned Greece into the 'storehouse' of illegal immigration to Europe."<sup>12</sup>

Golden Dawn campaigned on the streets, something that mainstream politicians avoided for fear of a hostile reaction from the public, which blames them for the country's economic ills. According to economists, illegal immigrants bear little or no responsibility at all for the Greeks' economic woes, yet the newcomers become easy scapegoats for politicians. The economic collapse has empowered fringe groups on the one hand and eroded the political mainstream on the other. Some Greek news outlets compare the situation to Weimar Germany. A Greek political scientist described contemporary Greek society as "a laboratory of extreme right-wing evolution."<sup>13</sup> Ken Matziorinis, an economics professor at McGill University, referred to the party's popularity and said that the situation was similar to the socioeconomic situation in Germany in the 1920s, which led to the rise of Fascism and Nazism.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, many parallels have been drawn between the rise of a far-right party in a country caught in the throes of a severe, even hopeless, financial crisis and the rise of the Nazis in Weimar Germany, a country whose economy had been crippled by inflation.

These comparisons are not mere academic theories, but are corroborated by the present reality. With its violence against immigrants, swastika-like emblem and Nazi salute, its aggressive rallies, and unabashed references to *Mein Kampf*, as well as its propagation of literature touting the racial superiority of the Greeks, promoting Aryan supremacy, racist and antisemitic ideology, and Holocaust denial, the party is the linear heir of the German National Socialists. In an interview on Greek television in mid-May 2012, before the elections, Golden Dawn leader Nikos Mihaloliakos denied the existence of gas chambers in Nazi death camps. When asked about Auschwitz, he responded:

What about Auschwitz?... I have not been to Auschwitz ...What happened [there]? Were you in Auschwitz?... I have read many books questioning the number of six million Jews. This exaggeration was fabricated... There were no ovens. This is a lie... nor did gas chambers [exist]...<sup>15</sup>

When asked about his future as a parliamentarian, he replied, "Of course I will respect the rules of the parliament... But if they start with the fairy tales about Hitler... I believe that he was a great historical figure of the twentieth century."<sup>16</sup>

Mihaloliakos also said the Nazi salutes used by Golden Dawn members were not official policy, although he himself was caught on video giving such a salute shortly after his election to the City Council in 2010. According to the September poll, his popularity shot up by 8 points, much more than any other party leader's.<sup>17</sup> Although Holocaust denial does not constitute a penal offense in Greece,<sup>18</sup> Mihaloliakos was condemned by the Greek government. According to its spokesman, his comments "... constitute a distortion of history... The Greek people have not forgotten that they mourned hundreds of thousands of victims of Nazism, including tens of thousands of Greek Jews."<sup>19</sup>

Political uncertainty engulfs Greece and it is not at all certain how it will emerge from the current crisis. However, one thing is clear: Historical memory tends to be very short, even when it pertains to the darkest ideology of European history. In the May elections, forty-four people of the district of Distomo voted for Golden Dawn—sixty-eight years after Waffen-SS troops massacred 218 men, women, and children in the village of Distomo on June 10, 1944. In the June elections, two small villages, each with 500 people, where men were murdered and their homes burned by the Nazis, voted for Golden Dawn.<sup>20</sup>

To be sure, Golden Dawn does not regard itself as a Nazi or even neo-Nazi party, but simply as a nationalist formation, the members of which seek to rescue Greece for the Greeks. With its nationalist rhetoric, the party appeals to Greek pride—to Greeks who see their country as having surrendered to the *diktats* of foreign lenders. Of course Greek nationalist sentiment is strongly anti-German. Greeks see Germany as both the political leader of the EU and its economic engine. Greeks feel hostile to their Euro zone lenders in much the same way that Germans felt humiliated between the world wars.<sup>21</sup>

Golden Dawn can now legitimately win votes while openly promoting hate speech and encouraging bigotry, racism, and antisemitism in the parliament. In an address to parliament on October 23 2012, in the context of discussions on lifting his immunity in connection with suspicions of assault, Golden Dawn spokesperson Ilias Kasidiaris read out a passage from the antisemitic forgery *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. There was no condemnation for that act and that silence was "doubly worrisome."<sup>22</sup> Even if the party is not a member of the governing coalition, it can certainly have an impact on the government, normalizing racist and antisemitic speech and placing its views into mainstream politics along the way.<sup>23</sup>

There is no doubt that Golden Dawn aims to influence the broader political discourse. Eleni Zaroulia, wife of party leader Mihaloliakos, became a member of the Greek parliamentary delegation to the Council of Europe and joined its Committee on Equality and Non-Discrimination on October 1, 2012. Officials

at the Council of Europe, a body established to promote democracy and protect human rights and the rule of law in Europe, explained that the formal process for her inclusion was respected. It is up to the Greek political leaders to change the composition of their national delegation to include only elected representatives from democratic parties.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, they are required to follow statutory procedure in order to remove Zaroulia from her position.<sup>25</sup> Failing to remove her would be “an affront to concepts of equality and non-discrimination” as Anti-Defamation League Director Abraham Foxman called it.<sup>26</sup>

While preparing this article for publication, a press release was published by the European Grassroots Antiracist Movement (EGAM) on December 17, 2012. It reads as follows: “EGAM congratulates itself of the decision announced by Greek Prime Minister Antonis Samaras during his meeting with Benjamin Abtan, the President of EGAM, today in Athens: ‘New Democracy is in favor of a new composition of the Greek parliamentary delegation to the Council of Europe without the neo-Nazis of Golden Dawn.’”<sup>27</sup> It remains to be seen how the Greek government will live up to what it has advocated.

Golden Dawn should no longer be treated as a legitimate political party. The fact that it was provided with a parliamentary platform was wrong in the first place, but now it has to be banned. The idea of outlawing the party is not new. Back in May 2012, following Golden Dawn’s first electoral victory, European Jewish Congress President Moshe Kantor called for a ban on European extremist groups.<sup>28</sup> In September of that same year, Muiznieks also called upon the Greek government to investigate whether Golden Dawn should be outlawed.

On August 25, resorting to the populist rhetoric common to far-right parties, Mihaloliakos gave a speech in which he declared, “If they want us to, we can abandon it [the parliament] at any given moment and take to the streets.” For the time being, however, Golden Dawn prefers to take advantage of the privileges afforded them as Greek MPs—including immunity from prosecution. In October 2012, parliamentary immunity for two Golden Dawn legislators was lifted as part of limited attempts to investigate the party.<sup>29</sup>

Greek Justice Minister Antonis Roupakiotis, who condemned Golden Dawn attacks and said that his ministry would consider tougher penalties for racist violence,<sup>30</sup> has stated that the best solution to the problem of extremism is to improve social conditions in Greece rather than ban a party. An amelioration of the difficult conditions would undermine Golden Dawn’s strength.<sup>31</sup> However, as the socioeconomic crisis worsens, the popularity of Golden Dawn is soaring.

In its concluding observations on Greece in August 2009, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) recommended that Greece "...ban Neo-Nazi groups from its territory and take more effective measures to promote tolerance towards persons of different ethnic origins."<sup>32</sup> It remains to be seen what measures undertaken by Greece are to be included in its forthcoming periodic report, due on July 18, 2013. One thing is clear, however: Today, unlike 2009, Greece has to confront not a neo-Nazi group, but a political party that is represented in the parliament and is enjoying a surge in popularity.

Only political awareness on the part of the state and its institutions, which were blamed for the lack of a decisive response to social and economic problems, can effectively reign in Golden Dawn. The law must be applied.<sup>33</sup> The police have to demonstrate zero tolerance for criminal acts and racially motivated violence. The authorities have to use all available means to arrest and to bring to justice the perpetrators of such behavior. In recognition of its political power, the state must have the means to democratically regulate and control immigration influx. The purposes of such policy are twofold: exposing the real face of Golden Dawn while also strengthening the institutions that are required to fight it.<sup>34</sup>

While efforts are being made by the Greek government to retain its pro-European bailout coalition, the rise of Golden Dawn makes a mockery of the great traditions of Greece—the cradle of civilization. It does this by disrespecting every democratic principle that the Greeks, as a nation, should be proud to uphold. The Greek government faces a financial crisis. But it also faces another formidable challenge—to preserve the cherished principles of equality and democracy and to save the country not only from economic bankruptcy, but from social, political, and, above all, moral bankruptcy as well.

## Notes

Some of the findings in this article were presented at the Tel Aviv University Kantor Center 11<sup>th</sup> International Seminar on Antisemitism held in Warsaw on October 15–17, 2012.

<sup>1</sup> Vanessa Gera, "Greek party most extreme of Europe's far right," *Salon*, May 17, 2012, [www.salon.com/2012/05/17/greek\\_party\\_most\\_extreme\\_of\\_europes\\_far\\_right](http://www.salon.com/2012/05/17/greek_party_most_extreme_of_europes_far_right).

<sup>2</sup> Daniel Dale, "In Greece: Anti-immigrant Golden Dawn party rides wave of xenophobia," *The Toronto Star*, June 29, 2012, [www.thestar.com/news/world/article/1219772--in-greece-far-right-golden-dawn-party-rides-wave-of-xenophobia](http://www.thestar.com/news/world/article/1219772--in-greece-far-right-golden-dawn-party-rides-wave-of-xenophobia); William Wheeler, "Europe's New Fascists," *The New York Times*, November 17, 2012, [www.nytimes.com/2012/11/18/opinion/sunday/europes-new-fascists.html?pagewanted=all](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/18/opinion/sunday/europes-new-fascists.html?pagewanted=all).

<sup>3</sup> Gavin Rabinowitz, "As Golden Dawn gains popularity, Greek Jews strategize on how to combat neo-Nazi party," *JTA*, November 1, 2012, [www.jta.org/news/](http://www.jta.org/news/)

article/2012/11/01/3110791/as-golden-dawn-gains-popularity-greek-jews-strategize-on-how-to-combat-neo-nazi-party.

- <sup>4</sup> Gordon Fairclough, "Far-Right Party Taps Greek Anger," *The Wall Street Journal*, October 16, 2012, [www.online.wsj.com/article/SB10000872396390443624204578056661472836612.html](http://www.online.wsj.com/article/SB10000872396390443624204578056661472836612.html).
- <sup>5</sup> Nikos Konstandaras, "Poverty can be beaten, hate cannot," *Ekathimerini.com*, April 12, 2012, [http://www.ekathimerini.com/4Dcgi/4dcgi/\\_w\\_articles\\_wsitesite3\\_22710\\_14/04/2012\\_437706](http://www.ekathimerini.com/4Dcgi/4dcgi/_w_articles_wsitesite3_22710_14/04/2012_437706) (The article appeared in the English version of *Kathimerini*, a daily newspaper published in Athens).
- <sup>6</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the National Commission for Human Rights (NCHR)'s press release, August 15, 2012.
- <sup>7</sup> Helena Smith, "Greek police send crime victims to neo-Nazi 'protectors.'" *The Guardian*, September 28, 2012, [www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/sep/28/greek-police-victims-neo-nazi](http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/sep/28/greek-police-victims-neo-nazi).
- <sup>8</sup> Katerina Nikolas, "Half of Greek police force voted for Golden Dawn," *digitaljournal.com*, June 21, 2012, <http://digitaljournal.com/article/326980>. See also, Laurie Penny, "It's not rhetoric to draw parallels with Nazism," *The Independent*, August 30, 2012, [www.independent.co.uk/voices/commentators/laurie-penny-its-not-rhetoric-to-draw-parallels-with-nazism-8092591.html](http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/commentators/laurie-penny-its-not-rhetoric-to-draw-parallels-with-nazism-8092591.html).
- <sup>9</sup> Rachel Hirshfeld, "Europe Urges Greece to Probe Legality of Neo-Nazi Party," *Arutz Sheva* website, July 16, 2012, [www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/157898](http://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/157898).
- <sup>10</sup> Liz Alderman, "Right Wing Extremists' Rising Rapidly in Greece," *The New York Times*, September 30, 2012, [www.nytimes.com/2012/10/01/world/europe/amid-greeces-worries-the-rise-of-right-wing-extremists.html?pagewanted=all](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/01/world/europe/amid-greeces-worries-the-rise-of-right-wing-extremists.html?pagewanted=all).
- <sup>11</sup> Penny, op. cit.
- <sup>12</sup> Charalambos Kasimis, "Greece: Illegal Immigration in the Midst of Crisis," *Migration Information Source* website, March 2012, [www.migrationinformation.org/Profiles/display.cfm?ID=884](http://www.migrationinformation.org/Profiles/display.cfm?ID=884). Dublin II Regulation (2003/343/CE) provides for the processing of asylum applications in the initial EU country of entry. See: *ibid*.
- <sup>13</sup> Rachel Donadio, Dimitris Bounias, "Hard Times Lift Greece's Anti-Immigrant Fringe," *The New York Times*, April 12, 2012, [www.nytimes.com/2012/04/13/world/europe/far-right-golden-dawn-sees-opening-in-greeces-woes.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/13/world/europe/far-right-golden-dawn-sees-opening-in-greeces-woes.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0).
- <sup>14</sup> "New Greek national party puts Montreal community on edge," *CBC News* website, October 13, 2012, [www.cbc.ca/news/canada/montreal/story/2012/10/13/golden-dawn-greek-montreal.html](http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/montreal/story/2012/10/13/golden-dawn-greek-montreal.html).
- <sup>15</sup> Greek Neo Nazi leader denies the Holocaust, *YouTube*, May 13, 2012, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=yXy7f17GXtQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yXy7f17GXtQ).
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid*.
- <sup>17</sup> Rachel Donadio, Dimitris Bounias, op.cit; Helena Smith, op.cit.
- <sup>18</sup> Michal Navoth, "Antisemitism in Greece: the trial of Konstantinos Plevris," *Stephen Roth Institute for the Study of Contemporary Antisemitism and Racism Topical Brief No. 8*, Tel Aviv University, 2011, p. 8, [www.tau.ac.il/Anti-Semitism/articles/](http://www.tau.ac.il/Anti-Semitism/articles/)

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- <sup>19</sup> “Greek Government, Jews Slam Golden Dawn chief for Holocaust denial,” JTA, May 15, 2012, [www.jta.org/news/article/2012/05/15/3095476/greek-neo-nazi-head-condemned-for-holocaust-denial](http://www.jta.org/news/article/2012/05/15/3095476/greek-neo-nazi-head-condemned-for-holocaust-denial); 70,000 Greek Jews, out of a prewar community of some 78,000, perished in the Holocaust. There are currently 5,000 Jews in Greece. Ibid.
- <sup>20</sup> *Haaretz*, May 11, 2012; June 19, 2012.
- <sup>21</sup> Natalie Savaricas, “Golden Dawn: The alarming rise of Greece’s far right,” *The Independent*, October 6, 2012, [www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/golden-dawn-the-alarming-rise-of-greeces-far-right-8200183.html](http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/golden-dawn-the-alarming-rise-of-greeces-far-right-8200183.html).
- <sup>22</sup> “Protocols of the Elders of Zion read aloud in Greek Parliament,” *Haaretz*, October 26, 2012, [www.haaretz.com/jewish-world/jewish-world-news/protocols-of-the-elders-of-zion-read-aloud-in-greek-parliament-1.472552](http://www.haaretz.com/jewish-world/jewish-world-news/protocols-of-the-elders-of-zion-read-aloud-in-greek-parliament-1.472552).
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- <sup>24</sup> Benjamin Abtan, “No, Mr. Samaras, ‘Golden Dawn’ is not a party like any other!” October 27, 2012, [www.e-balkan.net/engleski/17127-no-mr-samaras-l-golden-dawn-r-is-not-a-party-like-any-other-.html](http://www.e-balkan.net/engleski/17127-no-mr-samaras-l-golden-dawn-r-is-not-a-party-like-any-other-.html).
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- <sup>27</sup> [www.keeptalkinggreece.com/2012/12/17/egam-greek-pm-to-exclude-golden-dawn-mps-from-council-of-europe/?utm\\_source=feedburner&utm\\_medium=twitter&utm\\_campaign=Feed%3A+KeepTalkingGreece+\(Keep+Talking+Greece\)](http://www.keeptalkinggreece.com/2012/12/17/egam-greek-pm-to-exclude-golden-dawn-mps-from-council-of-europe/?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=twitter&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+KeepTalkingGreece+(Keep+Talking+Greece)).
- <sup>28</sup> Katherina Nikolas, “Greek ministers debate outlawing Golden Dawn,” *digitaljournal.com*, September 25, 2012, <http://digitaljournal.com/article/333527>.
- <sup>29</sup> Yiannis Baboulias, “Greece’s Golden Dawn isn’t a political party — it’s more like a criminal gang,” *The Guardian*, September 4, 2012, [www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/sep/04/greece-golden-dawn-not-political-party](http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/sep/04/greece-golden-dawn-not-political-party).
- <sup>30</sup> Alderman, *op.cit.*
- <sup>31</sup> Anthony Faiola, “Anti-immigrant Golden Dawn rises in Greece,” *The Washington Post*, October 20, 2012.
- <sup>32</sup> <http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G09/448/55/PDF/G0944855.pdf?OpenElement>.
- <sup>33</sup> Navoth, *op.cit.*, p. 8.
- <sup>34</sup> Andreas Pantazopoulos, “Fight neo-nazis with ideas,” *Press Europe*, September 5, 2012, [www.presseurop.eu/en/content/article/2642041-fight-neo-nazis-ideas](http://www.presseurop.eu/en/content/article/2642041-fight-neo-nazis-ideas).