

The rise of the Golden Dawn and extremism in Greece can be seen as part of a broader phenomenon of a culture of intolerance, which is maintained and perpetuated through the Greek education system.

Blog Admin

During the past month, Greece has seen a spate of incidents involving racist violence, as well as terrorist attacks targeting economic institutions. [Daphne Halikiopoulou](#) and [Sofia Vasilopoulou](#) argue that these incidents reflect not only the rise of the extreme-right in the country, typified by the Golden Dawn party, but the rise of extremism more generally. The extreme-right in Greece provides an avenue of expression for the angry, unemployed, and dispossessed. This, as well as other types of extremism and violence, constitute an outlet encouraged and maintained by the country's education system, which teaches lawlessness, resistance and defiance of authority as the defining features of Greek national identity.



Last week, while the Greek parliament deliberated a political inquiry into the infamous '[Lagarde](#)' list, yet another violent racist incident took place in the streets of central Athens. Shehzad Luqman, a 27 year old of Pakistani origin, was murdered while on his way to work in the early hours of January 16th. The offenders – a 29 year old fireman and his 25 year old unemployed accomplice – stabbed Shehzad, who was on his bicycle, because he was 'blocking' their way. Both offenders have been implicated with the law in the past, having been accused of robbery in 2007. The case is still pending trial. This is not an isolated incident. The United Nations Racist violence Recording Network [recorded](#) 87 incidents of racist violence in Greece in the past year. The majority of these occurred in public spaces (squares, streets and public transport) and involved physical attacks, beatings and stabbings. There were also incidents of arson and property damage.

This dramatic rise in racially motivated violence reflects the incitement of hatred by the soaring extreme-right, the failure of the Rule of Law, and the effects of rising unemployment. It has coincided with the rise of the extreme right-wing party, Golden Dawn. Following the arrest, the police found a variety of weapons in the lodgings of one of Shehzad's killers, including knives, an air pistol, brass knuckles, metal bullets and bats. They also found 50 or so Golden Dawn leaflets. This shows that the Golden Dawn is not simply an academic/theoretical problem: a luxury for those who, living outside Greece and unaffected by its economic woes, have the time and financial capacity to worry about philosophical liberal ideals. This is mostly a practical problem with significant social and political implications, illustrative of the legitimisation of violence which is taking place on a large scale in Greece. It is the reflection of deeply embedded sociological, economic and political structures and the extent to which the Golden Dawn has been able to capitalise on these.

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Although anti-fascist and anti-fascist civil society organisations and activities have grown in Greece recently – an anti-fascist demonstration was held in Athens last Saturday with the attendance of some three thousand people – right-wing extremism has also soared. Polls now place the Golden Dawn in third place, after New Democracy (the centre right), and SYRIZA (the radical left), with its support varying between 7 and 10 per cent depending on the poll. The Golden Dawn provides an avenue of expression for the dispossessed who, within the context of rising unemployment, seek an outlet for their anger and violence. The extent to which this violence goes unchecked reflects the failure of the state to maintain law and order in a society where the police force is at best inefficient and at worst linked with the extreme right. In the past months, the Greek police force has been the recipient of a number of accusations regarding its alleged links with the Golden Dawn. Recently, the BBC [reported](#) incidents of tourists being assaulted on racist grounds and held by the police as illegal immigrants.



Credit: Sofia Vasilopoulou

It is interesting that the Golden Dawn capitalises on the immigration issue. Greece has very high levels of immigration, both legal and illegal – amongst the highest in the EU as a percentage of its population. However levels of immigration have been consistently high since the early 1990s. And while immigrants are not adequately integrated in Greek society, they are fundamental for sustaining many aspects of the Greek economy. This constitutes a paradox and reflects the inadequacy of the state to provide welfare. The health system is a good example of this. Many Greeks are fully aware that health relies largely on a 'shadow system' that is sustained by illegal immigrants: cheap healthcare labour offered to and used by those Greeks who cannot afford to employ someone legally and pay for their social security. This is widely known and accepted in Greek society; yet, many Greeks stand firmly against immigration.

These strong anti-immigration sentiments and the rise of the far right reveal a deeply nationalistic society which has been socialised towards violence and defiance from a very young age. The economic crisis may be understood as a catalyst, exacerbated by structural conditions such as the fragmentation of the party system and state failure. Beyond these, an important underlying condition for the rise of the Golden Dawn is the perpetuation of a political culture that is favourable to extremism, maintained and reproduced through the highly centralised education system.

Greeks learn from a very young age that certain traits, such as lawlessness, resistance and defiance of authority, are the defining features of their national identity. For example, state-sponsored primary and secondary school textbooks glorify struggle and violence in their portrayal of certain events in Greek history, such as the Greek struggle for independence, the 'Asia Minor disaster' and the 'epic of the 1940s'. Although some attempts for textbook reform have taken place, they have ultimately resulted in failure following pressures from both the right and the left, as well as the Church – for example the withdrawal of a newly introduced history textbook in 2007.

It is therefore no surprise that extreme right-wing violence is not the only type of violence experienced in Greece, which has a history of polarisation. While racist and anti-immigrant violence is a phenomenon mostly associated with the right, we may also observe the proliferation of violent incidents directed against institutions and individuals seen as representing specific economic interests. Only in the past month, Greece witnessed numerous terrorist attacks targeting bank branches, the homes of five Greek journalists and the headquarters of New Democracy; and most recently, the explosion of a home-made bomb at a suburban Athens shopping mall – an attack which, although pre-warned, targeted a public

space in broad daylight.

The rise of violence, whether targeting immigrants or the representatives of specific economic interests, demonstrates that Greece lacks a culture of tolerance: a culture that accepts the rights of groups with whom one disagrees to freely and peacefully express their opinion and compete for power. This is why placing legal constraints on groups such as the Golden Dawn may serve as a temporary remedy, but is not a long term solution to the problem of violence. As the perpetuation of a political culture favourable to extremism is maintained and reproduced through the education system, the most appropriate solution is educational reform.

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