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Golden Dawn verdict—no sunset for the far right

With authoritarian conservatives in the White House and the Kremlin it's no surprise the far right is thriving in Europe

When I first met Ilias Panagiotoros, it was in the heavily fortified shop that doubled as his clothing business and political headquarters. Tough-looking men guarded the door; some internal doors were fortified with steel plates; the walls of the yard were high and strewn with razor wire. 'We are in a civil war,' he told me. 'A new kind of civil war: on the one side there will be nationalists like us; on the other hand there will be anarchists and people who destroyed this country.'

That was in 2012, at the height of Golden Dawn's power in Greece. The most violent fascist party in Europe had gained 21 seats in the 300-member parliament, with 7 per cent of the vote. Using his immunity from prosecution, Panagiotoros had just led a mob attack on a theatre production of the Terence McNally play *Corpus Christi*, accused of 'blasphemy'. Of other Golden Dawn attacks, on migrant-run market stalls and anarchist social centres, he was unrepentant.

Our violence, he told me, is controlled. If we didn't do it, our supporters would take things into their own hands. With Greece reeling under austerity and consent for democratic government and eurozone membership evaporating among the urban poor, he predicted that the then all-party coalition would fail, that the radical leftist Syriza would take power, that it would fail in turn and then Golden Dawn would take over within three years. Only if the 'International …' — I remember the smile coming to his eyes as he stopped himself conjuring up a Jewish conspiracy — 'make us illegal can they stop us'.

The rise and fall of Golden Dawn

Instead, on 7 October 2020, Panagiotoros, with seven other leaders of Golden Dawn, was convicted of running a criminal organisation. The three-judge court in Athens convicted a rank-and file member of the

murder of Pavlos Fyssas, an anti-fascist musician; others were convicted of organising an attack on migrant fishermen. But the criminal-enterprise conviction was strategic, taking in the effective leadership of the party, plus Giannis Lagos, currently an independent member of the European Parliament.

Between 2007, when revived by the economic crisis, and 2017, Golden Dawn pulled off something that should be impossible in an advanced democracy — the simultaneous operation of a legal, parliamentary party and a violent racist militia. It accumulated guns; its members conducted secret, occult rituals with Nazi memorabilia; it trained and deployed action squads on the model of Hitler's *Sturmabteilung*; its politicians physically attacked rival politicians live in television studios, and it had support in the ranks of the specialist riot police.

But the far-right danger in the rest of Europe is rising, not subsiding. On 6 October, a German government report documented 1,400 cases of extremist activity in the police, army and intelligence services.

At the peak of its influence, it was capable of scoring 14 per cent in the polls. In June 2012 it had taken one in ten voters from the conservative New Democracy party and almost one in five from the xenophobic nationalist party, LAOS. I asked Panagiotoros why, given the potential for electoral breakthrough, Golden Dawn didn't abandon violence, as other European far-right parties had done, and adopt a constitutional form of right-wing populism. His answer: because we don't have to.

That anomaly the court verdicts ended, closing a shameful episode not just for Greece but for Europe. Golden Dawn had already lost its seats in parliament; a replacement far-right party, the openly pro-Russian Greek Solution, has ten MPs and 4 per cent of the vote.

Rising, not subsiding

But the far-right danger in the rest of Europe is rising, not subsiding. On 6 October, a German government report documented 1,400 cases of extremist activity in the police, army and intelligence services. An entire special-forces company was disbanded after the discovery of far-right activity there. Though the German government has denied the problem is 'structural', the report said the right-wing extremist networks were larger than what had been discovered and constituted 'a significant danger for the state and for society'.

The neo-Nazi Nordic Resistance Movement chose in late September to mark *Yom Kippur* — the holiest day (of atonement) in the Jewish

calendar — with 20 anti-Semitic attacks, across Denmark, Sweden, Norway and Iceland, confronting Jewish worshippers, picketing synagogues and handing out anti-Semitic posters and flyers. The Finnish Supreme Court effectively banned the group, which is reported to have hundreds of members across the five countries.

Far-right political violence is growing in the Iberian peninsula. In Spain the electoral breakthrough by *Vox* in November 2019, and the backlash against Catalan independence, have made the country the European capital of violence against the left.

In Britain, where far-right, 'social media' content is heavily influenced by the discourse in the United States, the backlash against Black Lives Matter has turned up the volume and changed the object of far-right propaganda. Whereas previous iterations of fascism were targeted primarily at Islam, the massive size and militancy of the BLM protests has refocused hate speech against blackness. In the newly-formed Patriotic Alternative group, which intends to bring together the disparate strands of British far-right extremism, the US 'race science' narrative looms large, as do the defence of slavery and empire and attacks on anti-racist teaching in schools.

In recent weeks, demonstrations of several thousands in London have seen niche conspiracy theorists — against vaccinations and 5G telecoms — join science deniers on Covid-19 and climate, and a significant number of known far-right activists, defying public-health bans on large assemblies. Even in Ireland, where a left-wing 'republican movement' had largely stifled xenophobic nationalism, the pandemic has seen a disparate mix of 'yellow vests', anti-abortionists and (according to *gardaí*) republican 'dissidents' come together with the anti-mask / anti-vaccination movements to stage violent demonstrations.

Russian collaboration

These and other groups are, of course, willingly manipulated and amplified by the Russian hybrid-warfare apparatus. Russia's main focus in Europe is the radical parliamentary right: the United Russia party of the president, Vladimir Putin, has a formal alliance with the *Lega* in Italy and the *Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs* in Austria, while in France Marine Le Pen's *Rassemblement National* received a €9 million loan from a Russian bank.

But a second tier of collaboration exists: in 2015 Russia played host to an international conference involving Golden Dawn, figures from the *Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands* and the extreme-

right *Forza Nuova* group in Italy. This year, German intelligence revealed that the Russian Imperial Movement, a paramilitary group designated 'terrorist' by the US, had trained recruits from Germany, Finland and Sweden, some of whom served with Russian units in the conflict in eastern Ukraine.

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So the Golden Dawn verdicts, welcome though they are, may represent closure on a previous wave of European far-right extremism rather than a response to what is emerging. In contrast to the earlier focus on austerity and refugees, this wave is being driven by events in the US and, although incubated online, has increasingly used anti-mask / anti-lockdown protests to rediscover a street presence, as with the attempt to storm the *Reichstag* in August in Berlin.

And while the neo-Nazism of Golden Dawn — swastikas and SA paraphernalia were found in their bunkers — was a legacy ideology, the neo-Nazism of the American far right contains several newly minted themes: the far-right Telegram channels I am currently researching blend the radical Nazism of the *Machtergreifung* — anti-capitalism, anti-Semitism, misogyny and Aryan supremacy — with the socio-political programme of US libertarian conservatism. Into this assemblage, all current events are flung — the latest being the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh, where the international far right has rallied to the Armenian side, as the 'first Christian nation'.

US election

The future of these movements hangs in a very evident balance — the outcome of the US presidential election. The tacit endorsement of the Proud Boys, a violent white-supremacist movement, by the incumbent, Donald Trump, sparks a widely-anticipated potential scenario: voter-suppression activities by the extreme right on election day; a refusal to acknowledge the election result or an attempt to prevent the counting of postal ballots; then mayhem on the streets, until the courts resolve claim and counter-claim to the presidency.

Paradoxically, in these circumstances a victory for the Democratic candidate, Joe Biden, could present the greater opportunity for the European far right. Trump's plebeian supporters, already heavily subscribing to the QAnon conspiracy, will certainly stage low-level resistance to a Biden presidency, with or without the backing of Trump himself. This would be modelled on the Tea Party campaign against his

predecessor, Barack Obama, but with much more armed mobilisation and street violence, as well as open synergies between the evangelical right and the extreme right.

Golden Dawn, hopefully, is gone. But the European far right now draws support, ideology and resources from the authoritarian conservatives who rule the US and Russia. The intensity of far-right online discourse is impossible to measure, because its real effect is not in the Telegram channels but in the innocuous, closed Facebook groups of small-town communities. In my experience, Trump, Black Lives Matter and Covid-19 have, since March this year, increased its influence.

The crackdowns in Finland and Greece are welcome—both were sanctioned by the highest judicial authorities, with great prudence. They embody a practical lesson learned from the interwar failures of Giolittian Italy and Weimar Germany: do not tolerate a political party that has a violent militia.

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Paul Mason
London

Paul Mason is a British author and radio personality. In 2015 he published his book *PostCapitalism: A Guide to our Future* (Allen Lane).