
Resurgent Nationalism and austerity in Southern Europe

The recent wave of demonstrations in all Slovenia has caught everyone by surprise. But the appearance of a block of far right demonstrators and their subsequent fight with the police has received particular attention. A video was released via YouTube¹ the next day and had 25,000 views within two days. The video, of which parts were later broadcast also on Slovenian national television, suggested a link between this group and a neo-nazi demonstration in 2011. The question on peoples' minds was whether this signalled a rise of the far right in Slovenia? A month earlier, on October 25, 2012, a Golden Dawn party was officially established in Trieste, adopting the name Alba Dorata.

Around the same time, online articles have suggested that members of the Greek Golden Dawn (GD) party travelled to Malaga with the idea of establishing ties to local far right groups. While there is a big difference between the organization of GD and a small group of neo-nazis on a demonstration, the question of far right extremism is being foregrounded around Europe.

The rise of virulent, aggressive nationalism, drawing on Nazi iconography and ideas (anti-semitism being the most obvious example) has been particularly obvious in southern states of the European Union (E.U.), suggesting a connection to the severe recession and deep cuts in government spending. Greece, Italy and Spain, where far right groups have been quiet active are also where austerity was applied deepest. The question, however, is if the growing popularity and assertiveness of these groups is just a question of bad economic times? A closer look at Greece could shed some light on how this is not a spontaneous emergence of far-right extremism, but rather that the crisis has opened the terrain for these groups to come out of the shadows.

In Greece, news of Golden Dawn's rise is hardly a secret. The group was formed in 1980 by current leader Nikolaos Michaloliakos as a nationalist association. During the Balkan Wars of the 1990s, members of GD join the Republika Srpska military, fighting under Radovan Karadžić. Since 1993² they have been operating openly as a political party, gaining almost 7 percent of the popular vote in the June 2012 general election, translating into 18 seats. Their own paramilitary groups have also acted out, with impunity against migrants and immigrant communities in Athens and in the countryside; videos were published of attacks on migrant-run market stands in the town of Rafina. Then there is the infamous assault of a GD Member of Parliament (MP) on a colleague from the Communist Party during a televised debate.

Yet recent polls are reporting a rise in GDs popularity in Greece up to 22 percent. In all of this, the Greek government has been largely impotent in its reaction, only stripping a few GD MPs of their immunity, and only those who took part in the aforementioned filmed attacks on the market. The social movements have taken their own actions by doing their own street patrols. This has provided some protection to the vulnerable populations.

The Greek desperation has been feed first and foremost by an impossible economic situation. On the one side the E.U. is demanding cuts to an inflated state budget. On the other side,

1 Youtube link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H9QhUWemrpM&feature=plcp>

2 Apart from a brief hiatus in 2005.

no new wealth or income is being generated beyond high taxation. But the state is now taxing an almost destitute population. Also feeding these flames of resentment is the general portrayal of Greece, particularly in Germany, as the scapegoat of the Europe crisis. German Publications and newspapers have regularly portrayed Greeks as unwilling to work and living off of the bailout money. Some, such as Bild have run campaigns against the bailouts on the grounds Germans are paying for lazy, ungrateful Greeks.

In this situation, the far right has put its funds, including income from the GD entry into parliament, into social programs "for Greeks only", such as food banks, blood drives and eviction of immigrants from squatted apartments. After years of exhausting street battles with police and union strikes, little has changed. More and more people are falling into deep poverty and finding these types of services are the only source of help. In return however, they are asked to pledge their vote and support to the party.

In the case of Greece, the surge in GD's popularity came sometime after the financial crisis hit Europe, suggesting that economic conditions in Europe are producing this nationalism in parts of the population and national governments. But this presents a problem since it reduces many previous acts of nationalist violence to the level of exception, such as regular attacks on Roma communities in many E.U. states³, the murders committed in Germany by the National Socialist Underground, and the case Anders Breivik in Norway.

These forms of violence targeting non-national populations (and national populations considered to be sympathetic towards immigrants) are a constant feature of national politics, and the state of crisis simply produces a more fertile ground for sowing this kind of hatred. The point is, however, that this is not spontaneous, but rather organized over long period of time, some times organized by sub-state groups and nationalist movements, sometimes imposed by the state itself.

In Slovenia, it is still an open question whether the far right will be able to gain some power in the climate of austerity. Certainly any neo-nazi groups in Slovenia, such as Blood and Honour, have never been anything more than a relatively small sub-cultural phenomena. While some speculate that there are links to political parties on the right, there is no direct involvement either way. 2009 was the last attempt to hold a major demonstration, but it was overwhelmingly blocked by an Anti-Fascist counter rally.

Since then there have been few other public manifestations of any organized far right groups. Thus the appearance of a so-called neo-nazi black block on the November 30 demonstration came as a surprise to many. Yet even here, it was a small group and nothing has been heard from them since.

Socially, post-independence history is a mixed bag where racism and nationalism are concerned. After separating from Yugoslavia in 1991, the new state was defined as a state of 'ethnic Slovenes' first. Only second was it also a state of other national and ethnic categories. Then there is the case of the Erased, where 25,000 people were erased from the Register of Permanent Residence⁴. This erasure affected people who spent much or even all of their lives in Slovenia, but who were officially citizens of other Republics in Yugoslavia at the time of independence. In other words, they were from the south.

3 The most reactionary example being the military deployment in major Italian cities in 2008 to 'defend' the public against Roma and immigrant criminals.

4 This occurred in 1992, shortly after independence.

Once the erasure became common knowledge, as late as 2002, there was little public sympathy and even less government support to address it. Whatever the exact reasons for such a constitution and the public reaction to the erasure, popular, bureaucratic and social hierarchies and the creation of scape-goats for national ills has been a reality.

Yet the victory of Zoran Janković, Serbian born mayor of Ljubljana, at the national elections in December, 2011 and subsequent racist attack, gained public sympathy. Following the election, the defeated SDS⁵ party made racist statements on their web-site, claiming the victory was due to the “Čefuri” (Southerner) vote, referring to them as people who wear tracksuits and sneakers (trenerke). In this case however, the public saw through this position, and the party quickly distanced itself from this statement. Despite Janković not being able to form a government, he was re-elected as mayor of Ljubljana shortly thereafter.

On the economic front, Slovenia is now going through its second round of austerity. Deep cuts have been imposed primarily on the public sector, and none of the political elite seem willing to offer an alternative. In the recent presidential election, Borut Pahor won over incumbent Danilo Türk, despite Türk opposing austerity as a solution to the crisis. Pahor actually directly endorsed the cuts and won convincingly, but with very low voter turn-out. Despite this, despite the insecurity austerity and the crisis in general have introduced, far right nationalism had not been apparent, as in Greece or Spain. Certainly one could argue that Slovenia is a far cry from the 22-25 percent unemployment of other parts of Europe, and social services have certainly not degraded to the same levels as in Greece.

People are thus not yet experiencing the same existential fears. One could also argue that so far, the public debate around the crisis is largely dominated by the left, in the form of social movements and trade unions directing resentment and anger towards financial speculation and corrupt practices in Government and banking sectors. Even in the recent wave of protests, particularly in Maribor, demonstrators largely came on the streets as individual citizens; the so-called neo-nazi black block was one of the few exceptions. In all this no space has yet been given for attacks on foreigners.

While far right movements may not be symptomatic of a bad economy, they can pose a real threat in unstable times. The far right in Slovenia has not yet entered into the mainstream public debates, remaining a firmly sub-cultural reality. But what should be learned from the examples in Greece, is that the crisis opened the space for these groups along with many others.

The crisis may not produce these movements yet it can make their ideas appear legitimate, particularly when backed up by action and support. As need-based services, such as pensions and welfare begin to disappear, they must be filled to some degree by someone other than the state. The question is, who will that be?

By David Brown

5 Despite coming in first in the election, Janković was not able to form a coalition. The current coalition government was eventually formed under the right wing SDS lead by Janez Janša.