



# Golden Dawn: Lessons From Greece in Tackling Extremism

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## Introduction

Golden Dawn was an extreme far right political party which rose to prominence during a period of economic crisis in Greece. At the same time that its politicians were elected to parliament, its armed gangs were attacking refugees, migrants and other vulnerable minorities.

The story of how the Greek courts ultimately unmasked Golden Dawn as being a criminal organisation followed years of activism led by civil society groups.

With extremism on the rise internationally, Social Change Initiative has been honoured to draw out lessons from some of those involved in helping to defeat Golden Dawn in Greece. We were privileged to speak with activists and use their quotes, as seen throughout this document.

This experience holds significant value to those facing similar challenges in societies around the globe.

Greece Post-WWII

2020

Golden Dawn's growth was fuelled by a failure to resolve Greece's legacy of Nazi occupation, civil war (1946-49) & military dictatorship (1967-74)

1980s

Golden Dawn first emerges

2009

Polls 0.29% in elections

2012

Amid economic crisis, polls almost 7% & elects 18 MPs

2013

Awareness of Golden Dawn violence rises & sees public pressure for action

2015

Golden Dawn leadership goes on trial

Golden Dawn leaders convicted of running a criminal organisation

# Golden Dawn: Lessons From Greece in Tackling Extremism

There are many societies where it seems that far right politics could never move beyond the margins. Greece, which appeared to have put its troubled history of Nazi occupation, civil war, and dictatorship behind it, seemed to be one of them. But when its unresolved past collided with the unprecedented economic crisis it faced in 2009, everything changed.

Within a year the neo-Nazi Golden Dawn party had come from nowhere to emerge as a real political player, while its violent gangs were making their presence felt with attacks on migrants and minority groups. As one of the activists at the forefront of efforts to combat the group said: 'In one year, it skyrocketed.'

## 'The more the economic inequality, the stronger they got.'

The economic crisis facing Greece led to such a state of collapse that for many ordinary people it 'felt as if the state had disappeared'.

Golden Dawn capitalised on the severe economic hardship, pushing a political message that was anti-immigration and nationalistic, while on the streets it engaged in violence that mainly targeted migrants and refugees. Community-based publicity stunts saw Golden Dawn organise blood donation events 'Give Blood for Greeks', 'Foodbanks for Greeks', create fake media stories about escorting elderly people to collect their cash from ATM machines alleging risks from migrant attacks.

By 2011 a network of civil society groups was formed to address the attacks being carried out by Golden Dawn's 'battalions', which were under-reported by media and ignored by the state. This diverse network of 18 organisations sought to apply pressure to force the organs of the state to do their job, in response to dreadful crimes.

Most victims of Golden Dawn were undocumented migrants. If these victims reported attacks they risked arrest and deportation. If attacks were reported, Golden Dawn aggressors often claimed that they had been assaulted by their migrant victims. Activists mobilising in opposition to Golden Dawn experienced a 'system that was perpetuating non-accountability'.

By 2012 Golden Dawn had grown to become the third largest political party in Greece, electing 18 MPs with almost 7% of the vote. This emergence into the mainstream brought state funding into the party coffers. Meanwhile, on the streets, Golden Dawn organisers paid young people to engage in violence. Mobile phones and other belongings were stolen from victims to be sold. The prospect of cash attracted young people, but they were also attracted by the idea of hitting back at the state due to their experience of poverty and lack of opportunity, as well as being offered an easy target to blame for their economic woes – migrants and progressives.

Over time, Golden Dawn engaged in an interlinked range of tactics.



# Responding to Golden Dawn

As early as 2011 the failure of the state to respond to Golden Dawn violence led to the network of civil society organisations coming together to fill the gaps.

The Racist Violence Recording Network (RVRN) began to gather information on incidents, adopting a common methodology, in order to analyse and highlight racist violence trends in Greece. This compensated for the absence of an official data collection system. The scale of racist violence recorded by the network made a mockery of police claims that ‘they had detected one incident of racial hate crime on the streets of Athens’.

In a further development, the organisation HumanRights360 co-created an online platform to map these attacks, placing scannable QR codes at the actual locations of hate crimes to inform local communities. Artists depicted the attacks as part of the X Them Out Campaign.

Importantly, the data gathering exercise received international support from the European Union Agency For Fundamental Rights and the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights. In 2016, Greece was also convicted in the European Court of Human Rights over its failure to properly investigate a racially motivated attack. The Sakir vs. Greece case revealed how an Afghan man was beaten and stabbed by a masked gang in the centre of Athens. The victim was ultimately detained on grounds of lack of legal status, while the assault investigation closed without convictions.





The network documented 383 racist attacks from October 2011 to December 2013. A significant portion could be linked to Golden Dawn, though the figures represented the tip of the iceberg. The majority of the victims were refugees and migrants, and most were Muslim. Many of the attacks occurred in public places and Golden Dawn members used weapons such as batons, crowbars, folding truncheons, spray, chains, brass knuckles, knives and broken bottles.

Over time, the information gathering campaign raised awareness of the issues at home and abroad.

But it also provided a bank of evidence to substantiate the scale of Golden Dawn violence when two notorious murders sparked unprecedented public outrage.

Shehzad Luqman, a 27-year-old Pakistani national, was killed in January 2013. The murder in September of the same year of anti-fascist musician Pavlos Fyssas, a Greek national, led to major protests.

It was the killing of a Greek national, in particular, that eventually forced the state to respond to Golden Dawn.

## Legal Action and the Voices of Victims

Against the backdrop of growing public outcry, the state was to take a significant role in subsequent court proceedings. This culminated in the trial of the Golden Dawn leadership. The trial was led by state prosecutors on the basis of Article 187 of the Greek Criminal Code, described as being akin to the ‘mafia clause’, defining the nature of a criminal organisation.

Lawyers representing Golden Dawn’s victims in the proceedings worked pro bono. Golden Dawn lawyers, on the other hand, were employed by the party at its parliament and were well funded.

Media reporting of the lengthy trial was patchy, but civil society groups used social media to publicise proceedings as they unfolded in the court.



*‘For the public, the trial was a turning point to understand that Golden Dawn was a violent, criminal organisation.’*

Golden Dawn claimed it was the victim of a state conspiracy, but this claim was demolished when lawyers challenging the party brought forward its victims, who were shown to be vulnerable individuals and low-paid workers.

In October 2020 the trial which lasted more than five years came to a verdict. The court convicted seven of Golden Dawn's former MPs, including its founder and leader Nikolaos Michaloliakos, of heading a criminal organisation. They received sentences of 10 to 15 years in prison. Twenty other prominent members or former MPs were found guilty of participating in the criminal organisation. Twenty-seven members were condemned for specific criminal acts. They faced multi-year sentences, while the murderer of Pavlos Fyssas received a life sentence.

In the wake of the trial, there was no material difference to the legal status of migrants and refugees, but they could now 'walk more freely'. Meanwhile, Golden Dawn was now known in Greek society for what it always had been – a violent, criminal organisation.



**You say Golden Dawn  
now, you mean a  
criminal organisation.**

# Lessons for Global Activism

## Goal

Defeat and delegitimise Golden Dawn



## Strategy

Expose criminality and pressure state to 'do its job'



## Approaches Used

- Creation of civil society network
- Recording and monitoring of incidents and attacks
- Reporting and analysis of attacks - trends, patterns, areas
- Maximising human rights reporting mechanisms and key institutions to initiate investigations and produce reports
- Building strategic alliances with trade unions, anti fascist networks, migrant groups and victims of Golden Dawn attacks
- Challenging state inaction and impunity
- Supporting litigation and the provision of legal advice
- Provision of practical support to victims and to communities targeted by Golden Dawn



# Ingredients of Success in Defeating Golden Dawn

- **An organised civil society response is crucial.**

Invest time and effort in building inclusive networks that provide safe spaces for people to share insights and analysis about what was happening ‘on the ground’. The strength of the Racist Violence Recording Network lay in its diversity and its deep reach into many aspects of Greek society. The network built multiple strategic alliances with groups that had been fighting fascism for many decades and with new groups responding to what Golden Dawn was doing in communities. This solidarity and shared purpose, amongst a network of members who had varying degrees of visibility and presence, was powerful.

*‘We were smart enough not to have a narrow perspective’  
‘We involved people who wouldn’t ordinarily align in a month of Sundays’.*

- **Ensure clear blue water between civil society actions and those of political parties.**

Interests may align, but the experience of Greece points to the value of adopting an approach which seeks to focus on a healthy and clear separation at all costs. However, this does not preclude civil society from supporting courageous political leadership. When political voices did emerge to oppose Golden Dawn, it was recognised and applauded. Civil society played an important role by providing data on attacks and encouraging those emerging political voices to use language that countered Golden Dawn’s public narrative.

- **Don’t underestimate the importance of data gathering.**

A key part of defeating Golden Dawn lay in efforts made to document, record, monitor and report on its activities. Detail was important. Every story mattered. Stories highlighted patterns and trends, while humanising the impact of violence. Ultimately, the data gathering and the telling of victims’ stories proved its worth in court and in the court of public opinion.

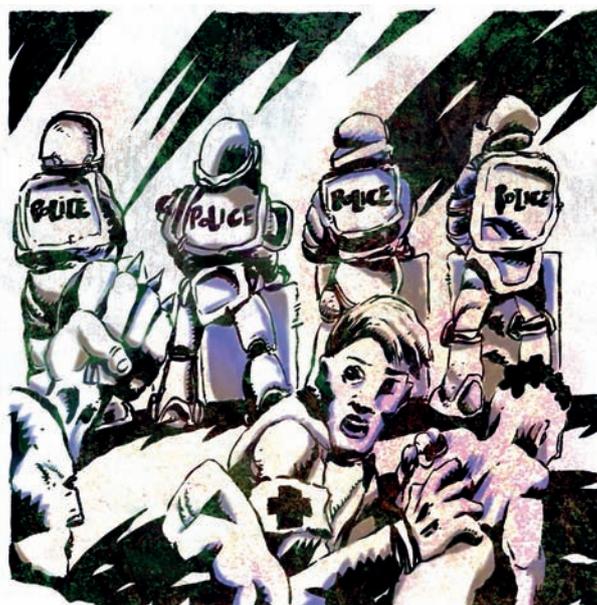
- **Leave no stone unturned in maximising influence.**

Civil society organisations made best use of semi state institutions to encourage them to investigate and highlight the actions and attacks by Golden Dawn. Institutions like the Ombudsman and the National Commission for Human Rights in Greece were able to bring resources and influence to bear on a political system that was largely indifferent. The Greek Ombudsman report on racist violence in 2013, for example, was hugely influential and led to a further report on the failure of policing.

*‘Lots of people were tired with migration, hostile, or even borderline xenophobic; some were also eager to turn a blind eye to extreme far-right violence. However, once we persisted in this detailed data-gathering that showed beyond any doubt that Golden Dawn was a group of well-paid thugs and not some “radical patriots”, the vast majority of the middle was ready to turn their back on them.’*

- **Highlight and engage international interest.**

This was especially important to exposing inaction on the part of the Greek state. UNHCR was one of the co-founders of the network. The European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights and the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights also played an important role. When such organisations included the network’s data in their own reports, it gave added legitimacy to the network’s methodology and helped Greek activists challenge their own government.



- **Have your day in court.**

The relentless push to have Golden Dawn brought to court for criminal charges was hugely important and game changing. It put pressure on politicians, and it kept the media and international community interested and invested. A wide range of groups (anti-fascist organisations, refugee groups, trade unions etc.) helped set the scene for the successful legal process. Mass rallies in response to murders were highly influential and caught the public mood. Previous legal cases and the information gathered by civil society was said by the lawyers to have been very important to the eventual prosecutions. Strategic litigation also proved to be a valuable tool to expose state inaction and increase pressure. Bringing the trial into the public consciousness via multiple creative channels contributed to a shift in opinion. The lengthy trial was not widely reported on a day-to-day basis, but the 'Golden Dawn Watch' project used social media reporting from the court to ensure information was reaching the public in real-time. It was another important tool. The court action did not, however, end with the trial. A number of those convicted lodged appeals, initiating further legal proceedings, which could go on for years.

*'The fact that the trial was in the public sphere and in the public sentiment was driven, not by the state, but by the families of the victims. This was very important for the legitimacy of the trial. The defendants, the members of Golden Dawn, were portraying this as a plot against them, that it was the political system that had moved against them.'*

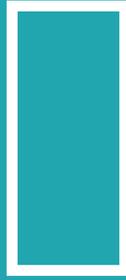


- **Create your own narrative and centre it on the experience and voice of victims**

Civil society in Greece was successful in creating its own narrative – it didn't allow itself to be led into countering Golden Dawn rhetoric and it didn't align to the narrative of the state (which portrayed right-left extremes as being as bad as one another). It stuck to the simple principle of giving voice and image to the victims and detailing the impact on communities, especially migrant communities. It exposed brutality, named names, exposed state inaction, and used turning points/pivotal moments to good effect.

*'We gave an image and a name to the victims and to the families. It was not an ideological choice. It is a choice which will make an impact on the success of any other such project. We need to give names to the victims'.*

*'It was very important that our side was not the political system, it was the families who had lost a kid; it was Egyptian fishermen; it was the poorest of the poor; it was trade unionists and working-class people. The driving force was from below'.*



## Things to be Vigilant and Cognisant About

- **Tackle not just the symptoms, but the cause.**

Golden Dawn gained support from wealthy individuals and poor communities alike. This disparate support gave legitimacy to Golden Dawn. It is important to understand the role of wealthy figures seeking to wield influence but, if we are to find ways to counter the appeal of political extremism, it is more important to understand the factors at play within economically deprived communities. In Greece, this required a lot of effort, including challenging decisions around discriminatory practices in respect of state supports (e.g., welfare, education etc.). It was also crucial to have people or organisations with prior experience of anti-fascism protests, who had credibility on the street and who, among other things, could help dissuade targeted communities from staging counter-violence. Some former members of Golden Dawn are already understood to have sought to reinvent themselves in new political guises. Such organisations may disappear, but the same cannot be said for the ideologies that drive extremism. Greek activists continue to report attacks on refugees and asylum seekers, as well as on NGOs. Despite the experience of the Golden Dawn era, human rights defenders have said that while the state has the legal framework to protect victims, it is still not doing it.

*'We have the legal framework but lack implementation.'*

- **Follow the money.**

It is important to be aware and vigilant around the powerful and often 'hidden' influences of wealthy individuals and big business, who have the ability to manipulate events. There needs to be support and encouragement of respected journalists to 'follow the money' and examine relationships. It is also important to support organisations such as trade unions and others who may be prey to infiltration by extremists. In the Greek experience, it was also important to expose the money-making activities of extremist groups. When Golden Dawn's financial motives were exposed, it stripped them of their ideology.

- **Address the legacy of the past.**

The unsettled political past of Greece and the failure to reform state institutions created circumstances which allowed Golden Dawn to gain political ground. Policing, for example, was culturally impacted by the failure to deal with the undemocratic implications of the Greek military junta of 1967-74. This failure to reform policing resulted in the inter-generational legacy of attitudes which fuelled Golden Dawn support among police. Electoral data showed that in some police departments there was an estimated 50% vote for Golden Dawn candidates. Even after the fall of Golden Dawn, the continued existence of harsh migration policies, the toxic public discourse around migration and the concerns of further economic crises, risk creating a climate where history could repeat itself.

- **Engage media early.**

Initially, there was limited reporting on Golden Dawn violence. Activists said that, had they realised that the Golden Dawn crisis was going to last so long, they would have prioritised media activity sooner. Media interest did grow after high profile attacks came to public prominence and at that point, campaigners were able to provide the media with data and analysis on the scale of violence. The stories of Golden Dawn's victims became important vehicles to convey the cruelty of the organisation. Activists also highlighted the propaganda activity of Golden Dawn, which could have been countered more effectively and at an earlier stage. This was an important lesson for the future, given the use of social media by extremist groups to win support.

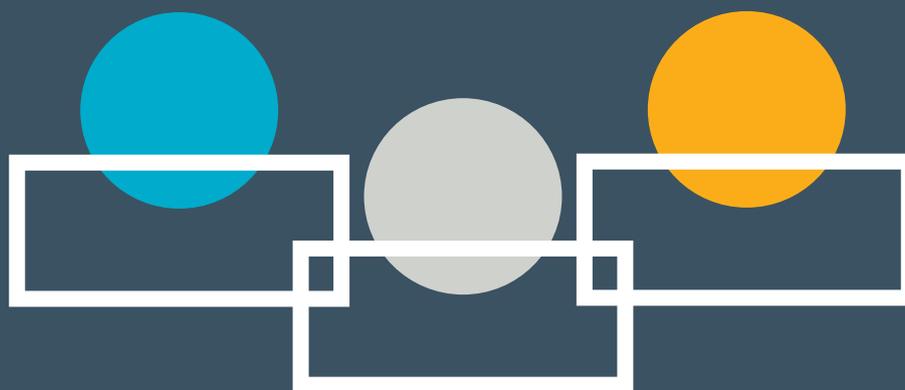
*'The good thing was that apart from the big two or three cases that were in the media anyway, we had the big data that the media were interested in – hard numbers. How many attacks? When? Where? By whom? And this is something the media need when they decide to report.'*





- **Recognise and support human rights defenders.**

Activists in Greece faced a violent, well-resourced organisation, which took years to defeat. It required a substantial level of commitment over a long period, when individual activists faced considerable risks, with no guarantee of success. Sustained in part by moral opposition to extremism and a desire to protect the vulnerable, activists said that ‘sometimes this might not be enough fuel’. Forming a network of organisations that could collaborate and support each other was important, as was the endorsement of their work by respected international organisations. But activists on the ground faced a long and lonely fight before public opinion and the state accepted the urgency of the issue. This experience underlines the need to put a broad range of supports in place for human rights defenders working on the ground in societies.



## Final reflections

Social Change Initiative believes that it is important for activists to share their experience, tactics, and learning.

Drawing lessons from the success of others, or finding out what they might have done differently with hindsight, is a valuable way of informing our efforts to ensure communities become fairer, more inclusive, and peaceful.

The factors that led to the rise of Golden Dawn - historical roots, economic crisis, 'othering', a failure of politics, of the state and state institutions – are evident in many other societies.

Globally, we are witnessing the rise of groups that are deeply nativist, connected to politics and who openly use violence and the threat of violence to advance their objectives.

One of the key lessons of the Greek experience is that it is possible to defeat violent extremism. This was done successfully through the creation of vehicles for action that provided an outlet for victims' stories, highlighted state failure, informed the public and pressed hard for accountability and justice.

But the defeat of Golden Dawn should not be read as meaning that its ideology has disappeared. Organisations wither, but their ideologies can remain.

The experience of Greece is that failure to deal with a society's troubled history can sow the seeds for extremism to re-emerge in the future.

Greece's unsettled past included a history of occupation, civil war, and dictatorship, which affected every aspect of the state, including its politics and its police service.

Holistic change is required across a society and its institutions to deal with the past and tackle the root causes of extremism if it is to avoid storing up problems for the future.

The Greek experience provides important lessons for us all.



ΣΤΕΜΑΤΑ

## Further Reading

- Golden Dawn on Trial: <https://rosalux.gr/en/publication/golden-dawn-trial-0>
- The book on 'X Them Out – A Black Map of Racist Violence': [http://www.toposbooks.gr/contents/eng/books\\_details\\_eng.php?nid=631](http://www.toposbooks.gr/contents/eng/books_details_eng.php?nid=631)
- Policing and Golden Dawn: <https://www.humanrights360.org/the-hellenic-police-and-the-racist-crime-through-the-golden-dawn-case-file/>
- The Murder of Pavlos Fyssas: <https://forensic-architecture.org/investigation/the-murder-of-pavlos-fyssas>
- The State of the Far Right in Greece: <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/athen/15846.pdf>
- Golden Dawn Watch (including The Golden Dawn Trial | Golden Dawn Watch)
- The rise and fall of Golden Dawn: <https://bjwa.brown.edu/27-2/the-rise-and-fall-of-golden-dawn/>

## Acknowledgements

### Original artworks illustrated by:

Kostas Kiriakakis p.1

Vasco Gargalo p.2

Molly Crabapple p. 4

Thomas Kefalas p.5

Vasco Gargalo p.6

John Antono p.7

Michalis Koudouris, Vasco Gargalo, Vasco Gargalo p.8

Pavlos Pavlidis p.10

John Antono p.11

Vasco Gargalo p.14

Tomek Giovanis p.15

Stella Stergiou p.17

### Hyperlinks:

Racist Violence Recording Network: <http://rvrn.org/category/english/>

HumanRights360: <https://www.humanrights360.org/>

X them Out: <https://valtoux.gr/en/>

Golden Dawn Watch: <https://goldendawnwatch.org/?lang=en>

Greek Ombudsman: <https://www.synigoros.gr/?i=stp.en>

National Commission for Human Rights in Greece: <https://www.nchr.gr/en/>

