

## **Christoforos Vernardakis - The versatility and the contradictions of the extreme right under conditions of political crisis**

*Christoforos Vernardakis analyzes the electoral behaviour of LAOS, explaining how it has consolidated its influence within the Greek political system and how it has managed to survive so far. He discusses the socio-economic characteristics of its electoral base and its opposition at being identified as an extreme right party, arguing that it is a political party that essentially "chases after social and electoral opportunities rather than having a coordinated strategy in order to create a powerful far-right party that is anti-systemic or anti-European."*

**ZS - PH:** Do you think that the recent attacks in Norway were unprecedented in terms of their geographical location, as well as, in relation to the target of the attack who were not immigrants but the internal enemy?

**Christoforos Vernardakis:** It is definitely unprecedented... in the sense that it has never occurred in the past. A characteristic of this event is that it was geographically located in a Scandinavian country, which is (more) socially balanced and (more) peaceful in its everyday life, in the operation of political institutions and of democracy in general. Although it is an extreme event: a single person acting alone, the question is whether this incident bears any political significance.

It is clear that the ideologies that motivated the perpetrator are shared by many. It seems that the views aiming to construct the internal enemy as a solid enemy have spread all over Europe. This amounts to a cultural shift or, to put it in other words, to an element of political culture that is currently under revision. This shift internalizes and obsessively interprets the gravity of the welfare crisis and, more generally, the financial crisis that plagues Europe. The problem is not so much the extreme psychopathologic actions of one person, but the fact that they are part of a prevailing discourse that has developed across Europe trying to uncover the causes of the financial crisis and interpret them in this particular way. I do not know whether something similar will occur in other countries or with the same intensity but it is obvious that while decline keeps on being diffused due to the social and financial crisis, similar phenomena will emerge, perhaps not in such extreme forms, but possibly as everyday social automations.

**ZS - PH:** What are the convergences and divergences between the Greek and the wider European extreme right regarding their organization and ideology?

**Christoforos Vernardakis:** From my point of view, in Greece, if we consider LAOS ([Popular Orthodox Rally](#)) as a typical far-right party, there are differentiations not so much in terms of ideology, but in relation to the management of symbols. LAOS, in my opinion, is more a party of the "centre" rather than of the extreme right: LAOS

avoids its identification as an extreme right party and masks its references, while in other countries the agenda and the political positioning of right-wing parties is clear, following a conscious extreme right strategy. To go back to the 1980s in France and the appearance of the National Front of Le Pen, I remember that the “Lepenian” deployment defined itself as anti-systemic extreme right party, maintaining an absolutely critical stance towards the political system. This clear anti-systemic identity invested the National Front with its political, electoral and organizational strength.

In the Greek case, on the contrary, LAOS operates through continuous mutations in its political strategy (initially, for example, LAOS supported PASOK and the EU-ECB-IMF memorandum, then it declared its opposition to both and identified with the parties of the left on certain issues, then it sought the unification of the right-wing political forces under the theory of “block of flats”, and finally it participated in the government of “national salvation”). The direct political strategy of LAOS reveals, in fact, a systemic political power and this differentiates it from other European extreme right parties. Of course, in essence, LAOS never ceases to be a party positioned in the space of the extreme right, in the sense that its political agenda, its ideology and the articulation of its primary cultural-ideological references are of the far right, but the management of those is systemic rather than anti-systemic. From this point of view, [the Golden Dawn](#) (Hrysi Aygi) is a much more typical extreme right political formation than LAOS, with a more clear extreme right political position.

**ZS - PH:** Comparing LAOS and the Golden Dawn, can you briefly analyse the socio-economic profile of their electoral base?

**Christoforos Vernardakis:** The studies that have been made about the electoral base of LAOS demonstrate that it is a "catch-all" party. LAOS is not a party that embodies a similar electoral geography with that of the European extreme right. As Vasiliki Georgiadou has also demonstrated, in Europe, the traditional electoral base of far-right parties were the unemployed and, generally, the low socio-economic strata. In Greece we do not observe a corresponding tendency. On the contrary, we find that LAOS has a horizontal and balanced electoral base (which includes affluent social groups, parts of the bourgeoisie who advocate liberalization, partisans of neo-liberalism, etc.).

Another basic feature of the extreme right, for example, is that it desires a powerful state and economic interventionism. In Greece though, the LAOS differentiates itself from this position. LAOS' political discourse includes many references in favour of a powerful intrusive state, but other references support the need for less state intervention. LAOS has also managed to win a part of the voters of Nea Demokratia, that someone could categorise as neo-liberal, rather than far right. If we, therefore, observe the electoral geography of the vote in the last parliamentary elections, we see that LAOS follows the classic pattern of the traditional right (with electoral power in affluent areas of Athens), without meaning though that it was not supported by working classes. In sum, LAOS is a "catch-all" party, which means that it doesn't have a clear socio-electoral core. Furthermore, another differentiation compared to the

European extreme right is the organization of LAOS. Its organizational mechanism is loose and fuzzy: it is not a militant mass party like many European extreme right parties that are disciplined and centralised, nor does it share similar features with the formation of the Golden Dawn.

It is difficult to analyze, correspondingly, the electoral composition of the Golden Dawn, as we have not a sufficient sample of its actual electoral influence. In case the Golden Dawn wins a significant percentage in the next national elections, then I think we could categorise it in the typical “family” of the European extreme right. LAOS, instead, embodies an amalgam of political elements: some systemic, some liberal, some populist, some bourgeois and some reactionary. If I were to use a neologism, I would rather characterize LAOS as a party of the “extremist centre”.

**ZS - PH:** Do you think that there is a general European tendency towards this direction because of the financial crisis? For example, if we look at the case of Marie Le Pen, as well as other European extreme right parties, that in the context of the financial crisis tend to position themselves towards the centre and to mitigate their anti-systemic elements due to the electoral opportunities that is presented to them?

**Christoforos Vernardakis:** This is possible, but each country has its own characteristics and its own tradition. I think, that wherever the parties occupying the historical space of the extreme right are more powerful and enjoy a political, electoral and cultural tradition, it is easier for the extreme right to move into more systemic positions because it has the “luxury” to do so, it has the “luxury” of a powerful starting point. I have on my mind the case of Marie Le Pen, who heads today a political formation with a history of more than 30 years (although France's extreme right tradition predates the birth of the party of Le Pen), and can count on a very powerful electoral base in order to proceed to a systemic transformation of the National Front. The same thing happened in Italy, where Gianfranco Fini and Umberto Bossi coming from the traditional extreme right, each in his own different way, shifted to systemic positions.

This is another differentiation in comparison to the Greek case. LAOS cannot count on a critical electoral mass that is unnegotiable, at least not yet. I believe that Karatzaferis is more of a typical politician who chases after social and electoral opportunities rather than having a coordinated strategy in order to create a powerful far-right party that is anti-systemic or anti-European. In this sense, there is a possibility that LAOS will be in jeopardy in the near future by the possible rise of the Golden Dawn which is trying to construct a more stable and clear far-right space and, of course, by New Democracy, if Samaras will attempt to re-integrate the nationalist voters of LAOS, a move that is relatively easy to imagine.

**ZS - PH:** How do you explain the rise of the electoral power of the extreme right? Do you think that it is a result of the crisis of the political system or that it can be explained as a thematic vote?

**Christoforos Vernardakis:** The rise of extreme right formations is not spectacular in the context of the contemporary financial crisis. Today, the electoral influence of LAOS ranges from 4.5% up to 9% of the total electoral preferences. I believe that LAOS is trying, more generally, to take advantage of the crisis of the political system and to appropriate the social reactions that this crisis provokes. As a result of this strategy, LAOS plays, depending on the conjuncture, different and often contradictory “roles” and this is how, in my opinion, we can explain its versatility.

If we think, though, of the considerable electoral influence of the Golden Dawn in the last municipal elections in Athens, I would say that we should interpret this electoral reality by stripping it from its ideological context. In my opinion, the basic issue is that the Golden Dawn fills in specific urban areas the wide gap that the official state, government policies, etc. , as well as the left leave. The Golden Dawn operates by doing “field work”: taking issue with objective everyday problems, rather than focusing an ideological struggle. It has managed to establish a state within a state in those urban areas, offering “security” - and this is a tangible result for local residents, especially because government agencies are absent.

**ZS - PH:** The creation of Papademos’ coalition government, paved the way for LAOS, which succeeded in participating for the first time in the Greek government. What are your thoughts on this development?

**Christoforos Vernardakis:** The participation of LAOS in government confirms the dual strategy that it follows. It expresses “far-right” (or at least “ultra-conservative”) ideologies and attempts to inscribe them in a systemic way, and especially as a part of a typical neoliberal government, as Papademos’ three party government is. Actually, LAOS is seeking opportunities in order to appear as “responsible” and “useful” for the nation, without abandoning its basic ideological coordinates. It constitutes, thus, a unique entity, in the context of the extreme right political family.

**ZS - PH:** Regarding the public discourse and the public sphere in Greece, how do you evaluate the influence of the extreme right in the discussion about the financial crisis and the problems of the urban center of Athens?

**Christoforos Vernardakis:** The essential far-right perspective is much wider and broader than the electoral influence of LAOS and the Golden Dawn. The “foreigners out” (from the country) standpoint cannot be easily confronted. The typical raw material of this standpoint is the disconnection of cause and effect. There are too many people who are imbued with such ideological preconceptions. In general, regarding social and cultural issues it is obvious that the far-right discourse is much more powerful than its direct electoral reference.

Regarding the financial crisis, the situation is getting even harder because the financial crisis is multiform and multilevel... it is not easy for someone to “read” it.

Its analysis must necessarily some hypothetical correlations. The issue of the financial crisis is very fluid.

**ZS - PH:** How would you evaluate existing progressive and anti-racist practices and initiatives?

**Christoforos Vernardakis:** Unfortunately, here, there is a very serious problem. The main issue is to tackle and resolve the problems that the extreme right exploits and to provide concrete solutions. For example, in areas, such as Agios Panteleimonas, the municipality should have been a very important tool, intervening in order to strengthen the sense of safety of local residents as well as to support the coexistence of diverse ethnic groups.

Instead, the gap that is left by the lack of policy at all levels of state administration is filled by the “fieldwork” of the Golden Dawn. The Golden Dawn intervenes on this gap in order to solve the security problem in the way that this party understands it: by “protecting” (even with the use of violence) the Greek residents of Agios Panteleimonas. If the far right experiment in this area expands across the capital of Athens then a real militant and fascist extreme right will emerge in Greece.

**ZS - PH:** At the level of “field work”, how could we reflect on effective anti-racist practices, given the absence of action on the part of state agencies?

**Christoforos Vernardakis:** A key idea could be the effort to discharge the problem of this urban area. If, for example 10.000 impoverished people inhabit in an area, the public priority is to secure social care for their residence and nutrition, at least for some period of time. It is necessary, therefore, to create some social circumstances that will directly impact the area and it is essential that the residents of the area participate in addressing the problem: they need to be assigned a specific role in any attempt of discharging their area. I, (at least), have never come across the implementation of such a policy by any Greek party of the left.

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*Christoforos Vernardakis talked to Zoi Savvopoulou and Pavlos Hatzopoulos in Athens in November 2011.*