Cycles of Protest and the Rise of the Extremes: Political Violence in Greece in the Era of the Economic Crisis

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Abstract

This paper will outline the political violence in Greece in the post-crisis era, in order to deconstruct the narrative of the ‘age of extremes’ that currently dominates the country’s political discourse. Indeed, following the theory’s reasoning will examine both left-wing and right wing political violence, focusing on the recent upsurge of left-wing terrorism and the racist violence of Golden Dawn, respectively. Subsequently, through the assessment of the reasons behind its dominance, this paper will argue that although there is an evident rise of extremism in Greece nowadays, the ‘age of extremes’ is not only just a narrative, but a dangerous one.

Keywords: political violence, economic crisis, cycles of protest, Greece, Golden Dawn, left-wing terrorism

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Introduction

The end of the first decade of the twenty-first century was marked by the global economic crisis and its devastating effects, with the European Union as one of the most affected regions, and Greece, in particular, as one of the states that have been hit harder. Actually, the facts today, as the country has entered the sixth consecutive year of recession, are rather staggering; indeed, the unemployment rate is at 27 per cent in total and at 61 per cent among those aged under 24; the one-third of Greek citizens have been already considered below the poverty line, and with another 27, 7 per cent on the brink of poverty or social exclusion (Frangouli-Argyris 2013); the 20 per cent total shrank of GDP that has been witnessed since 2008; and the largest internal devaluation of the country since the 1930s (Douzinas 2012). Moreover, the adoption by the Greek government of the first Memorandum of Understanding in May 2010, as drafted by the ‘Troika’ (the IMF, the European Commission, and the European Central Bank), in order for Greece to avoid the bailout has prompted the application of some of the harshest austerity measures and policies ever implemented in the Eurozone. As a result, this exploding combination of the economic crisis and the neoliberal policies has triggered a large wave of protests, which can be seen nowadays as the most massive cycle of contention of modern Greece. Besides, it also caused the emergence and intensification of a number of different forms of political violence that currently coexist and interrelate. Thus, this paper will outline the post-crisis rise of political violence in Greece and the construction of the discourse of the ‘age of extremes’ that it facilitated. Indeed, by the use of the above reasoning this paper will assess left-wing and right-wing violence in Greece, and then the state’s repression, in an attempt to deconstruct the current dominance of the ‘age of extremes’ discourse in the country. Notwithstanding, in order for someone to explicate the existing political violence in Greece, he definitely has to delineate the events of December 2008, often regarded ‘as an instance of contentious politics par excellence’ (Kotronaki, & Seferiades, p. 157), and their impact in the course of political violence in the country, and to the country itself.
Contention, Cycles of Contention, and Political Violence

In this point, is considered necessary to discuss further the main concepts that this paper will employ in order to describe the turbulent situation in Greece nowadays, along with the notion of political violence per se. Initially, it is worth differentiating the notions of contention and conflict, with that of violence. Hence, on the words of McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly (1996), contention is ‘the making of interest-entailing claims on others […] and […] at least one party to the interaction (including third parties) is a government’ (p. 17). That significantly resembles what Wiewiorka (2009) has recently defined as ‘conflict’; that is, the process that ‘involves the – more or less institutionalized relationship between contentious claimants and the state (or, more broadly, the authorities)’ (p. 9). Thus, according to Seferiades and Johnston (2012), what distinguishes the concepts of contention/conflict from that of violence is the relationship between claimants and the state, as ‘claims need to be both adequately articulated (by the claimants) and sufficiently responded to (by the authorities)’ (p. 5).

In some cases societies experience periods of intensified contention or protest activity, characterized by the participation of a number of diverse groups or social movements – identified here as ‘a (i) collection of informal networks, based (ii) on shared beliefs and solidarity, which mobilize about (iii) conflictual issues, through (iv) the frequent use of various forms of protest’ (della Porta, & Gbikpi 2012, p. 88) - and in support of one or more issues. These occasions have been called cycles of contention or protest. Analytically, Tarrow (1998) defines a cycle of contention, as:

a phase of, heightened conflict across the social system, with a rapid diffusion of collective action from more mobilized to less mobilize sectors, a rapid pace of innovation in the forms of contention, the creation of new or transformed collective action frames, a combination of organized and unorganized participation, and sequences of intensified information flow and interaction between challengers and authorities (p. 199).

From the above definitions, it becomes clear that the interaction between claimants and institutions is in the epicenter of the discussion about contention and violence, and one of its most significant features. In particular, this paper employs the
‘relational’ approach of understanding political violence, outlined by Tilly (2003), as the one that focus on the interaction and, eventually, conflict of non-institutional (‘challengers’) and institutional (‘members’) actors (pp. 7-9). Indeed, according to this approach violence occurs in periods of ‘conflictual irrelevance’, namely periods when either the challenging actors cannot adequately communicate their claims and grievances (disruptive deficit) or the authorities are unable or unwilling to respond to their requests (reform deficit) (Seferiades, & Johnston 2012, p. 5). When those two deficits coincide, usually violence – comprehended in this case as ‘an expression of the exhaustion of conflict’ (Wiewiorka 2009, p. 16) - tends to rise and fill the political vacuum. In addition, one of the main advantages of the ‘relational’ approach is that it recognizes political violence as a method that can be employed by both institutional (e.g. states) and non-institutional (e.g. social movements) actors. Consequently, political violence is identified here as a particular repertoire of collective action that is considered illegitimate in the dominant culture, involves physical force and causes damage to the adversary in order to impose political aims (della Porta 1995, pp. 3-4).

Equally important for the objectives of this paper are as well the different forms of political violence. In fact, two of the most prominent scholars in the field of political violence and social movements tend to distinguish them according to their organization and ferocity level. Specifically, Tilly (2003) classifies the varieties of political violence in relation to the ‘salience of short-run damage’, namely the degree that violence characterizes the action as a whole, and the ‘extent of coordination among violent actors’ (p. 13). Likewise, della Porta (1995) some years ago developed a typology of political violence, using as variables the degree of violence in a repertoire, differentiating between low-level (against objects) and high-level violence (against people), and the actor’s degree of organization (spontaneous and organized violence) (p. 4). According to this typology there are four different kinds of political violence: to be precise, unspecialized violence (low-level and unorganized); semimilitary violence (still low-level, but more organized); autonomous violence (loosely organized and spontaneous); and clandestine violence (high-level and well organized) (Ibid). These categories can be very helpful in the understanding of the current situation in Greece, were various kinds of political violence coexist and interrelate in everyday life. Nonetheless, in order to facilitate the goals of this research
and to discuss whether or not Greece experiences an ‘age of extremes’ nowadays, it is considered more useful to differentiate the political violence in accordance with the actor employing it and its position in the political array; thus, this paper will, in the first place, assess left-wing and right-wing violence in Greece, and then the state’s repression. However, in order to fully appreciate the circumstances under which the violent phenomena have taken place, someone has to primarily examine the case of December 2008 and the cycle of contention that has subsequently triggered.

December 2008 and the Modern Cycle of Contention (2008-2013)

Commonly characterized as an ‘urban riot’ (Kanellopoulos 2012) and identified in the same category with older violent incidents, such as those in Los Angeles (1982) and Paris (2005) (della Porta, & Gbikpi 2012), the December of 2008 and its effects can still been traced in Greek political and everyday life. Nonetheless, and owing to the fact that has been able to significantly polarize both the public opinion and the intelligentsia in Greece, and the relatively recent experience of the ‘uprising’ itself, its role and legacy in the course of the country’s political violence has not yet been studied adequately. Undoubtedly, in spite the conflicting understandings, one cannot downgrade its significance and the need for further research.

What initiated, in the first place, the massive wave of protest and rioting was the murder of a 15 year old teenager, Alexandros Grigoropoulos, by a policeman on the 6th of December 2008. The near-instant response of a number of different actors, from ‘usual suspects’ like left activists, and the radical anarchic community of the Exarcheia neighbourhood (Vradis, & Dalakoglou 2010) - where the assassination occurred – to rather ‘unusual suspects’, such as school students, immigrants, and ordinary citizens, was definitely a shock for Greek society and a ‘severe disruption to the existing [post-junta era’s] violence equilibrium’ (Vradis 2012). Indeed, according to Johnston and Seferiades (2012), ‘the protests of the Greek December 2008 were
distinguished by their breadth, scope of claims and depth of anger’ (p. 149). A variety of action repertoires, like marches and demonstrations in police departments, sit-ins in front of state’s institutional buildings, attacks in banks, looting of shops, occupations of universities and schools, and daily clashes with the police, took place in Athens and a vast number of small and bigger cities all around Greece, for almost three weeks. Besides, the international impact of the “revolution” was equally significant, as ‘more than 200 solidarity actions took place in December alone’ (Vradis, & Dalakoglou 2010) around the world.

On the one hand, according to some, the events of December 2008 were predominantly a ‘product of a sustained resistance by a militant minority of activists who have been fighting against government policies for at least a decade’ (Lountos 2012, p. 183). This kind of views focus principally on the role of a leftist and anarchic milieu, based largely in Exarcheia, that achieved to force its own contention repertoire, forged through a number of different cycles of contention since the 1990’s, in the ‘uprising’. Indeed, several authors also mention the significance of the severe political crisis that Greece was experiencing, at least since the start of the 21st century (Vradis, & Dalakoglou 2011). Moreover, the importance of other structural factors to the manifestation of the ‘revolt’ is also frequently mentioned; namely, the governments’ neoliberal policies, the unemployment’s rates, the feeling of illegitimacy of the parliamentary democracy in general, and a widespread protest culture (Johnston, & Seferiades 2012, p. 150).

On the other hand, though, there is the opinion that the Greek December decisively ‘challenged our interpretive tools and frames’ (Kouki 2009, p. 28), as it was ‘alien to anything that Greek society had experienced in the decades following the end of the dictatorship’ (Vradis 2011). Indeed, a number of features such as its great geographical and social diffusion, the combination of violent and non-violent actions’ repertoire, and the polarization within the Greek political system that the events provoked, have essentially differentiated it from other related instances. Thus, according to Kotronaki and Seferiades (2012), December 2008 should be considered, particularly owing to the above features, as a new, under-theorized, and more intense
form of political violence; namely as insurrectionary collective action (p. 157). In that sense, these events have decisively marked the Greek modern era, interpreted by some, as either the end of the Metapolitefsi (post-dictatorship period), or as a prelude of the massive cycle of contention that Greece has been experiencing since. Besides, on the international legacy of December 2008, Sotiris (2010) asserted that the events ‘represent a turning point’ and ‘have already secured an important place in the history of modern social movements’ against neoliberalism (p. 203).

Indeed, after 2008 a vast number of social movements, from student movements and trade unions (INE GSEE – ADEDY), to NIMBY local struggles¹ (Keratea 2010, Skouries 2013) and huge demonstrations against the austerity measures, the IMF and the Greek government have taken place in Athens, but also all over the country. In particular, since the 5th of May 2010 and the first general strike called in response to the Memorandum, which was stigmatized by the death of three bank employees that were trapped inside the burning bank, dozens of others have followed up to the present day, to form probably the most massive protest cycle of modern Greece. In fact, the approximate number since the debt crisis in 2010 has been estimated to more than 20 national strikes (BBC 2012). Part of this cycle was also the Greek ‘Indignant’ movement, which from May 2011 and for several months organized, without any political or trade affiliation – something remarkably new for Greek protest culture -, several massive protests with people taking over peacefully the central squares of major cities. More precisely, the ‘movement of the squares’, which was initiated as a call for solidarity to Spanish ‘Indignados’ movement, is recognized by Sotiris (2011) as a turning point in the intensification of protest, as it represents a unique in duration, extent and participation case of social unrest; in fact, the number of protesters peaked at more than 300,000 on the 5th of June 2011 (Sotirakopoulos 2011). Since then, protests have become even more regular in Greek everyday life, with people expressing their opposition ‘in terms of the defense of the nation, of a meaningful national sovereignty, [and] of resisting those of selling out the country’ (Mazower 2013), as well as against the existing rotten and illegitimate state institutions and the political system as a whole. Indeed, the radicalization of Greek society can become further apparent, as according to a public opinion poll carried out in late 2010 and early 2011 on the reactions to the economic crisis, 14 percent of the respondents
recognized violence as a legitimate means of expression, while 10 percent expressed their toleration towards the perpetration of damage to buildings (Cited in Xenakis 2012).

**Left-wing Violence**

Apart from the role leftist and anarchic radical militants and networks had in the organization and development of December 2008 ‘uprising’, it should be also highlighted their role in the current cycle of contention and the post-memorandum era. Nonetheless, this paper will focus on the unprecedented rise of left-wing terrorism after the 2008, considering that new terrorist groups emerged from the sparks of the ‘revolt’, such as the ‘second generation’ of Greek terrorist groups; that is the Revolutionary Struggle (RS), the Conspiracy of the Cells of Fire (CCF), and the Sect of Revolutionaries (SR).

In fact, Left-wing terrorism has surprisingly been one of the main forms of political violence that Greece has confronted with for more than four decades. What is more, the number of attacks in Greece claimed by left wing terrorist groups has been continuously escalating: from 17 attacks in the 1970s (1968-1980) and 66 attacks in the 1980s (1981-1990), to 120 in the 1990s (1991-2000) and 148 attacks in the 2000s (2001-2010) (RAND Corporation 2013). Moreover, despite the fact that mainstream thinking in contemporary terrorism studies comprehends left-wing terrorism as a fairly minor or even a non-security issue in the most parts of the world, the case of Greece seems to decisively challenges it. Indeed, the facts from the last decade (2001-2010) reveal that only in this period 68 different groups have claimed responsibility for terrorist attacks in Greece (Ibid), and that approximately the 82 per cent of the total attacks claimed by left wing terrorist organisations in Western Europe in the 2000s are attributed to Greek groups (in absolute contrast with only the 3 per cent of the 1970s) (START 2013).
Specifically, left-wing terrorism in Greece has its origins in the eras of the Civil War (1943-1950) and the Military Junta (1967-1974), and principally in the Athens Polytechnic uprising (17th November 1973). In fact, the latter represented not only the first glimmer of hope that Junta could fall, but also the decisive move towards the radicalisation of one section of the population participating in the events. Indeed, two of the most crucial, for the development of the phenomenon in Greece, terrorist organisations had their origins in the incidents in 1973; those are, the Revolutionary Organisation November 17 (17N) and the Revolutionary Armed Struggle (ELA). In fact, it was following the Metapolitefsi – the transition from the military dictatorship to democracy- in 1974 that the two groups started their ‘revolutionary’ struggle, against the new administration that had been seen as ‘a junta by another name’ (Kassimeris 2005, p.760).

Besides, from the end of the 1960s Greece was characterised by the magnification of what has become known as the ‘left-libertarian’ movement family (Kitschelt 1990), defined by della Porta (1995) as ‘a set of movements that emerged during the cycle of protest that started at the end of the sixties and participated, then, in several protests campaigns in the seventies and the eighties’ (p. 3). In fact, the upsurge of the protest movement in Greece against the junta coincided and interrelated with the global protest spirit that the May 1968 movement conveyed to the world. What is more, in cases such as that of Italy (Tarrow 1989), Germany (Varon 2004), and the USA (Braungart, & Braungart 1992), mass protest activity gave rise to events of terrorist violence, as in the Greek case. Consequently, the April of 1975 - the year of the first terrorist attack in the country - symbolises not only the emergence of left-wing terrorism in Greece, but also the fall of the cycle of contention that started during the junta in the end of the sixties, peaked during the days of November 1973 and the Polytechnic uprising, and subsided after the restoration of democracy.

Consequently, from 1975 to the arrest of the ‘first generation’ - 17N and Revolutionary Armed Struggle (ELA) (2002-2003) - , a vast number of terrorist
attacks took place in the country, with the Greek state powerless to proceed to any arrest for almost three decades (To Vima 2002). This failure of the Greek state to handle the issue can be explained by a number of reasons, with the most distinctive the fact that the Greek state had for several years ignored the threat of terrorism, as not a serious one, and had perceived it ‘as an ephemeral phenomenon, attributed to a group of extreme left militants’ (Karyotis 2007, p. 278).

Nonetheless, the arrest of the groups of the ‘first generation’ in the start of the 21st century caused the temporary decline of the terrorist attacks (Xenakis 2012); a situation that has utterly changed since the December of 2008. In fact, the emergence of the ‘second generation’ of terrorist organizations, like the CCF and the SR, along with the RS that appeared in 2003 after the arrest of 17N, have made it clear that terrorism in Greece has deeper roots than it was previously supposed. What is more, the latest findings of the Greek anti-terrorist agency are far from disquieting. Hence, the arrest of 20 individuals that have taken part in actions of CCF two years ago, with a number of different nuclei of radicals still escaping the arrest, the substantial artillery that has already been seized in three towns in Greece and in 12 different hideouts, along with the group’s adaptability to the police’s inspection, have made it clear that dealing with this new generation of terrorism will be quite demanding (Marnelos 2011). Likewise, the recent appearance of new groups that have lately assumed responsibility for attacks in places like the tube station of Aigaleo (February 2012) and a popular mall in the northern suburbs of Athens (January 2013), as well as for targeting journalists and parties’ officers (January 2013), demonstrates their tendency towards the intensification of their contentious action and confirm the above assertion.

**Right-wing Violence**

In contrast to the continuous presence of left-wing political violence in Greek political scene of the post-dictatorial era, right-wing political violence can be recognized as a fairly unusual phenomenon; in reality, instances of the latter were regular in the eras
during and after the Civil war, and the Colonels’ junta. Nonetheless, we should highlight the case of 1979, when a nucleus of extreme right was arrested for terrorist activity (Xenakis 2012, p. 440). What is striking is that one of its prominent members was the founder and current leader (Nikolaos Michaloliakos) of a radical right-wing, frequently described also as neo-nazi or fascist, political party; that is the Golden Dawn. In particular, the recent electoral success of the party in the consecutive national elections of May and June 2012, which had as a result the current presence of 18 MPs in the Greek parliament (and 7% nationally), was received as a shock by the largest part of the country. Founded in 1980, Golden Dawn has always been, along with the whole array of radical right-wing parties (National Political Union, National Front), a marginal political force in electoral terms; with the only exception that of National Alignment that in the national elections of 1977 won the 6,82 % of the votes (Lymouris 2012). Currently, the fact that according to some opinion polls, Golden Dawn, a party whose ‘violence is not merely theoretical or rhetorical, but enacted on the streets’ (Mazower 2013), is recognized as the third largest party in Greece makes its case rather worrying and thought-provoking.

Actually, Golden Dawn’s first noteworthy appearance in Greek politics was in the start of 1990’s, when the initial discussions of the naming dispute between Greece and Macedonia begun, and the Yugoslavian war erupted; these two developments had as a result the intensification of nationalism in the country, followed by a series of large protests in Athens (Psarras 2012). No matter what, group’s clandestine and street violence have become profoundly present the last five years, and especially since 2009 and the mobilizations against immigrants in the neighborhood of Agios Panteleimonas, in central Athens. Hence, by exploiting the rising xenophobia and the security void in the Greek capital, the party won a seat in Athens City Council in 2010 (Wheeler 2012). Moreover, there are several signs of an explosion in racist violence over the last year and since June’s national elections, as according to rights groups the number of attacks against immigrants runs into hundreds (Becatoros 2012). These findings vigorously demonstrate, in the words of Mazower (2013), the reasons why ‘Golden Dawn represents a real rupture with the country’s democratic traditions and the most serious threat to it since 1974.’ As a matter of fact, the group’s racialism, its paramilitary activity against the immigrants, its anti-Semitism, and its anti-
communism brings more and more, to mind the German Nazi ideology (Penny 2012). Furthermore, attacks have been expanded, as well, in order to include also the gay and leftist communities; in fact, the group’s enmity has been also directed to what it has acknowledged as not ‘real Greeks’, as traitors of the nation (Psarras 2012). What is more, facts as the attempt to open a blood bank only for Greeks, the food banks only for Greeks in Syntagma square, and the recent commencement of a programme of education for Greek children only, further highpoint the danger that Golden Dawn epitomizes for contemporary Greek society.

Actually, the rise of Golden Dawn to the largest historical percentage of extreme right in Greece, and probably to the third most popular party nowadays, has not at all been accidental. In effect, several reasons have facilitated its upsurge. First and foremost, the large disappointment of Greek citizens with party politics and the entire political system, which had as a consequence the overall transformation of party landscape. Indeed, the dissolution of the two-party system of Metapolitefsi, as both the New Democracy and the PASOK seen their electoral percentages shrinking in their historical minima, and the devastation of the Greek political center, assisted in the polarization of the political scene. Actually, according to Douzinas (2012), this has been ‘one of those rare occasions where the distance between the public and mainstream politicians has become a chasm.’ Moreover, the framing of political opposition and major protest in the post-crisis era exclusively around the question of whether you are for or against the memorandum, along with a discourse that raised issues of national sovereignty and independence, had as a result the rise of nationalism and of a binary logic of ‘us’ against ‘them’, which benefited greatly the Golden Dawn (Mazower 2013). Additionally, the disruptive deficit created by the use of a conventional repertoire of action of the traditional protest actors (e.g. left parties, trade unions) (Seferiades, & Jonhston 2012, p. 17), along with the rise of a-political, or even anti-political, protest movements - as the Indignants have been identified (Sotirakopoulos & Sotiropoulos 2013) -, amplified the rise of movements driven by contentious ideologies, as fascism and, therefore, of Golden Dawn (Kalyvas 2013). Other reasons also include the legitimization of the political agenda of the party through the participation of LAOS in the provisional coalition government of November 2011- May 2012; the right wing move of the mainstream right party of
New Democracy, especially during the June’s 2012 pre-election period, with the employment of a xenophobic and anti-immigrant discourse (Arzheimer, & Carter 2006, p. 439); and, finally, as it became apparent, especially after the elections of May 2012, that a coalition government would have been formed (Ibid).

State’s Repression

In this point and in order to holistically depict the political violence in Greece during the economic crisis, someone has to refer, as well, to state’s repression policies and practices. After all, we should not forget also that ‘violence is shaped and constrained by the interactions among different actors…’ (della Porta, & Gbikpi 2012, p. 89), and so can be recognized as the ‘product of complex relations among protestors, state authorities, and the general populace’ (Goldstone 2012, p. 117). Pursuing this argument further, it should be highlighted the role of state violence in the December 2008 ‘unrest’. Nonetheless, the murder of the teenager ‘acted [more] as a catalyst for the expression of various forms of social discontent’ (Sotiris 2010, p. 204), than ‘simply as a reaction to police brutality’ (Ibid, p. 206). On the other hand, it should also be noted the historical hostility, distrust, and the feeling of civil disobedience towards the police authorities of a large part of the Greek society, as a result of the long period of state repression, especially towards the left and its advocates, during the periods of the Civil war and the Military junta; which in fact, constituted the origin of the December events according to a number of scholars (Kalyvas 2008; Veremis 2008).

However, state repression has been evidently intensified since the aftermath of the Greek December; in fact, the initial condemnation by the government of New Democracy of the police officer’s action and the passive monitoring of the riots, quickly turned into a vehement support of repression and the framing of the event as an accident, mainly as a response to calls of ‘law and order’ from the other
parliamentary parties (Kanellopoulos 2012, p. 176). Specifically, PASOK and the parties of the Left used the events in order to promote their own political agendas and undermine further, the already destabilized, right-wing government. Nonetheless, when PASOK came to power, in October 2009, has encouraged the construction of a discourse of ‘a war-like [...] financial emergency’ (Vradis, & Dalakoglou 2010), that exploited the ongoing crisis to interpret every protest, strike, and contentious action against the government as opposed to an imaginary common good. This narration of the crisis has been the dominant discourse of the post-memorandum era in general, and has been further utilized to enforce state repression and the IMF’s and EU’s drafted neoliberal policies.

Hence, the last years have been marked, not only by an upsurge of the level of left- and right-wing violence, but also of state’s repression policy. In particular, according to Xenakis (2012), an important source of radicalization and resentment has been the severely disproportionate use of violence by the armed riot police (the MAT), which co-exists with the weakness of the state to prevent or punish such violence (p. 445). A characteristic instance of police violence was the torture of fifteen anti-fascist protesters in the General Police Directorate in Athens (GADA) in October 2012, after their arrest during a clash with Golden Dawn’s supporters (Margaronis 2012a). More recent examples of the state’s repression and the need of the current government to enforce in the society a ‘law and order’ programme have been: the evacuation of occupied buildings associated with the anarchist movement of Athens (December 2012), the abuse and torture of four anarchists - wanted also for participating in CCF’s terrorist actions - that were arrested for a double bank robbery in the city of Kozani (February 2013) (Baboulias 2013), and lastly, the brutal intervention of the armed riot police in the village of Ierissos after the residents’ opposition to a controversial gold mining project (March 2013) (Kathimerini 2013).

What is more, there has been a critical concern over the accusations that suggest a deep infiltration and influence of Golden Dawn in Greek police’s apparatus (Chatzistefanou 2012). Actually, there have been instances that Golden Dawn assumed the role of law enforcement in the streets of Athens or acted in the name of
the state without the fear of punishment (e.g. Rafina, Messolongi, Tripoli) (Mason 2012a). Alas, there has also been a report by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Nils Muiznieks, which argues that there have been strong evidences of police and Golden Dawn’s collaboration; indeed, in a period of eight months (January – September 2012) there were documented 15 incidents (out of 87 total attacks), where police and racist violence were interlinked (Cited in Mason 2012b). Besides, with reference to the last national elections of June 2012, Golden Dawn polled 19-24 percent in the Athens’ wards where the police voted in large numbers (Margaronis 2012b).

The ‘Age of Extremes’

This tremendous rise of Golden Dawn and its impact in the country’s political life the last years, along with the aforementioned augmentation of left-wing violence, have induced some to argue that Greece experiences a new ‘age of extremism’. The above concept was coined by Hobsbawm (1994) in his attempt to describe the interwar era of the great ideological and economic confrontations, between fascism and communism in the first place, and capitalism and communism in the second. Besides, it is also reminiscent to the Cold war’s theory of ‘totalitarianism’, developed by American political scientists in the 1950s, in order to bring together the systemic similarities of the German Third Reich and the Soviet Union. However, owing to the fundamental differences of the two regimes, the theory was abandoned quite rapidly.

In the present day, the idea of the two extremes is also frequently employed to draw comparisons between the contemporary conditions in Greece with that in Weimar Republic in Germany during the 1930s (Ios 2012). As a matter of fact, the present circumstances that Greece, and Europe to some extent, experience resemble those of the interwar period in certain aspects; such as, the widespread feeling of delegitimization of parliamentary democracy and its institutions, the ongoing crisis of
capitalism, and the rise of nationalism and fascism. Nonetheless, and despite that there is an obvious rise of extremism in Greece recently, this time period cannot be identified as a new ‘age of extremes’ for two important reasons. Initially, the interwar period was characterized by a broad ‘militarized mobilization’ and to a degree it functioned as an era of preparation for the upcoming WWII that followed; which is certainly not the case in Greece nowadays (Mazower 2013). In addition, we are still far from a new ‘age of extremes’ owing to the fact that the two phenomena are not at all comparable. Indeed, although left-wing terrorism has endured for four decades in Greece, has not ever truly endangered democracy (Kassimeris 2001, p. 7); actually, it has always been recognized as a rather fringe phenomenon and in electoral terms has been inconsequential. On the contrary, the upsurge of Golden Dawn and its participation in the parliament since last June has critically influenced the coalition’s government agenda, such as in the outline of immigration and visa policies. Moreover, the suspected infiltration of the party in the Greek police, the cases of interlinked police and racist violence, and the divisions between Greeks and foreigners, and ‘real’ and ‘not real’ Greeks, that enforces in the society prove that threat of neo-nazism in Greece is far more grave than that of left-wing violence.

Consequently, for all the aforesaid reasons, I argue that there is a deliberate attempt to frame as similar as possible the two ‘extremes’ of the political arc, especially in terms of the use of violence as their *modus operandi*. Thus, this narrative aims to juxtapose the above violent extremes with a moderate and non-violent center, which is presented as the best possible scenario of the country’s governance. In effect, the ‘age of extremes’ discourse has been recurrently used by New Democracy and PASOK, in order to delegitimize the parties of the Left, and especially SYRIZA, which is considered according to some opinion polls as the most prominent party to win the next national elections. Indeed, the process of delegitimization of SYRIZA has also been facilitated, even before the elections of May 2012, by the appearance of several publications in prominent European newspapers, which described it as a threat not only to Greece, but also to the whole EU; such an example is the article in Greek that appeared in the German *Financial Times*, in order to convince voters not to vote for the left-wing party (Financial Times Deutschland 2012). Another attempt to denote SYRIZA and its leader Alexis Tsipras as radical and extremist was also his inclusion
at the ‘ten most dangerous politicians in Europe’, according to the German journal *Der Spiegel*, where he was placed next to people, such as Jean-Marie Le Penn and Geert Wilders (cited in Horvat 2013).

Thus, the narration of the ‘age of extremes’ can be conceived as an attempt of the coalition government to fortify its neoliberal policies, downgrade the widespread protest feeling and the various contentious actors, and devaluate the main opposition party (SYRIZA) through connecting it with violent phenomena, such as that of left-wing terrorism (Mazower 2013). In final consideration, the current dominance the narrative in the country’s political and social discourse is not only premeditated, but also, more importantly, rather dangerous, as it intensifies the polarization of Greek society, obstructs the state’s proper reaction to both phenomena, and obfuscates the real danger that Golden Dawn poses to Greece currently.

**Conclusions**

Through, the outline of the different forms of political violence and the actors involved in Greece in the post-crisis era, this paper attempted to analyze the tumultuous political scene of the country. Initially, the momentous effects of December 2008, that functioned ‘as a transformative catalyst of contentious politics in Greece’ (Kotronaki, & Seferiades 2012, p. 169), were traced. Subsequently, the unprecedented and concurrent upsurge, on the one hand, of left-wing terrorism, and, on the other, of Golden Dawn’s racist violence, have severely stigmatized the period; in reality, the striking resemblance of the current phase of Greek politics with that of Italy’s in the 1970’s (Fritzsche 1989), where the vicious antagonism of the left and right extremism culminated eventually in a spiral of terrorist violence between the two opposing camps, make its future seem quite ominous and the need for further analysis of the phenomena quite vital. Besides, the intensification of state’s repression practices has been another worrying trajectory of the recent period that obscures
further the already perplexed, political and economic, situation of Greece nowadays. Nonetheless, in response to the ‘age of extremes’ and its dominance in the country’s current political discourse, we should unambiguously identify it more as a narrative, which was solidified in order to legitimize the EU’s and the Greek governments’ neoliberal policies and to downplay the oppositional and protest voices, and less as an actual fact.
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Notes

[1] NIMBY is an acronym for the phrase “not in my back yard.” The term is a pejorative characterization of opposition by residents to a proposal for a new development because it is close to them.

[2] In fact, the first attempt to associate the Left and the Right in Greece was made by the first government of Metapolitefsi in 1974, via the employment of the discourse of “anarcho-juntism.”

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