

Greece: 'Their ideas had no place here': how Crete kicked out Golden Dawn

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Teachers and activists in Heraklion explain how they drove the ultra-nationalist, far-right Greek party from the island

Washing hangs from the balconies of an unassuming apartment block on Irodotou street in Heraklion, the capital of Crete. Outside, children ride bikes and old men play cards in a coffee shop. But before May this year, this building looked rather different. A sign hung outside reading: "Golden Dawn, Heraklion region". The ultra-nationalist, far-right Greek party used this street as its local base.

It was local teachers who first spotted its influence. "Two of my 13-year-old students had family problems," recalls Maria Oikonomaki, 50. "Golden Dawn approached them in cafes and the gym, presenting themselves as family and protectors. They took them for coffee and gave them lessons on Greek history."

I thought to myself: 'My god, what is happening?'

Maria Oikonomaki

Then came the violence, including [the stabbing of two Pakistani workers](#). "I thought to myself: 'My god, what is happening in this neighbourhood?'" says Oikonomaki.

Despite the attacks, Golden Dawn might have kept its foothold in Heraklion – or dug in deeper – had the city's residents not decided to fight back.

Golden Dawn was formed in 1980 and remained a fringe party until Greece's devastating financial crisis started in 2009. As faith in the major political parties ebbed away, Golden Dawn's narrative of a once-great nation ruined by immigration struck a chord with some disillusioned voters. As well as becoming [the third-largest party in the Greek parliament](#), it also established a street-based paramilitary wing that [regularly attacked immigrants](#) and political opponents.

"Because [Golden Dawn] is a grassroots movement, local support is fundamental to its success," says Daphne Halikiopoulou, associate professor at Reading University and Golden Dawn expert. "It targeted areas where it knew it could build a good presence, and expanded its organisation significantly."

The area it chose in Heraklion was the eastern suburb of Nea Alikarnassos. A working-class neighbourhood, it has a long history of immigration from Asia Minor and eastern [Europe](#). Many

residents are employed in construction and lost their jobs during the crisis. Golden Dawn quietly opened its office here in 2011.

Crete's anti-fascist movement initially struggled to fight back.

"Our philosophy is that you never let the far right get hold of public space," says Konstantinos (not his real name), a militant anti-fascist in his early 20s. "In warmer countries like [Greece](#), public space is where the working class spends their lives. Wherever fascists are present, you have to make your presence felt too."

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Haris Zafiropoulos

So, when they found out about the new office, Konstantinos and other activists arranged a neighbourhood assembly. "There was a general consensus that people didn't want Golden Dawn in the area," he says, "but not enough people came to support the assembly. We realised we couldn't have a presence in the area all the time. We tried to keep an eye on them, but there wasn't much we could do."

In September 2012, everything changed. In a crime that shocked the country, the [prominent anti-fascist rapper Pavlos Fyssas](#) was allegedly murdered on Golden Dawn's orders. Huge protests broke out and 69 members of the party, including its leader, Nikolaos Michaloliakos, and 18 MPs, were arrested and [charged with running a criminal organisation](#). Their trial is ongoing.

"Before this, a lot of people had the attitude of 'We do not fear Golden Dawn, we just need to educate them'," says Haris Zafiropoulos, a 27-year-old activist with [New Left Current](#), a coalition of left-wing groups.

Activists such as Zafiropoulos embarked on a new strategy: taking to the streets and engaging in face-to-face conversations about fascism and why it needed to be confronted.

"Every weekend we went to the neighbourhood and spoke to people," Zafiropoulos says. "Crete suffered a lot from the Nazis in the second world war, and whole villages were burned down. We tried to remind people what had happened before, and what is happening now."

Meanwhile, across Crete, teachers rallied to address the radicalisation taking place in schools. "The way the fascists moved within the pupil community was so clever and so sneaky, we did not realise what was going on at first," says Fotis Bichakis, founder of the Cretan League of Anti-Fascist Teachers. "It was easy for young students who were feeling frustrated to become manipulated."

The teachers worked together to prepare lesson plans that taught history in a less nationalist way and explained and confronted fascist ideologies. The following spring, 56 schools collaborated on an anti-fascist festival.

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Konstantinos

“We celebrate the culture of all the migrant groups on the island, sharing their music, their traditions, the stories of how they came to Greece,” says Bichakis of the now-annual festival. “We took the philosophy of getting as many people together as possible – parents, teachers, pupils, university students. We tried to make [Golden Dawn] understand their ideas had no place in our region. And this was how we won.”

The teachers chose not to view already-recruited students as lost causes. “We always had faith they could come back to democratic ideals,” adds Bichakis. “As they saw more of their peers joining in with anti-fascism, they began to question whether they had been misled.”

Oikonomaki says she believes the strategy stopped any more of her pupils being radicalised. “We had students from Albania, Romania, Bulgaria,” she says. “I’d tell pupils: ‘Golden Dawn says other people are inferior to Greeks. Do you really think that about your friend John you sit next to every day?’”

Militant activists also made the controversial decision to confront the group violently. In April 2018, Konstantinos and around 70 other anti-fascists organised a night attack on the Heraklion office. “We destroyed everything of value – the floors, the ceilings, the AC unit,” he says. “We think that was the final straw for them.”

Indeed, Golden Dawn packed up and left two weeks later.

Not everyone in the community is happy about the violence. “It’s important we don’t come across as two sides of the same coin,” says Zafiropoulos.

Konstantinos, however, is unrepentant. “It worked!” he says. “We may not be able to stop Golden Dawn becoming celebrities in the media, but we can stop them spreading their roots within Greek society. Crete is the first major region of Greece to have no Golden Dawn presence ... We have effectively stopped them from having any space to reproduce.”

Elsewhere in Greece, the far right appears to be on the rise again. The country’s [dispute with Macedonia over its name](#) has led to swell of nationalism, and there have been violent attacks [on politicians](#) and [asylum-seekers](#). Halikiopoulou believes anti-fascist activism of the type used in Crete can work “on a local level. But opposition cannot and should not be confined to the anti-fascist left. We need something on a more organised, mainstream level.”

Oikonomaki is wary of saying the battle is fully over. “We could easily communicate who Golden Dawn were and why they were bad,” she says. “But the crisis is not over, and people still want to put the blame on someone. Hidden fascism is almost more dangerous.”

Jessica Bateman

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