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Thirties Throwbacks: Explaining the Electoral Breakthroughs of Jobbik and Golden Dawn

An honors thesis for the International Relations Program

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Table of Contents

Chapter 1. Introduction	4
Chapter 2. Nationalist Extremists – A New Party Family	9
Chapter 3. Explaining Nationalist Extremist Success	31
Chapter 4. Jobbik and Hungary	52
Chapter 5. Golden Dawn and Greece	91
Chapter 6. Conclusion.....	122
Notes	126
Bibliography	137

Abstract

The radical right experienced a general resurgence across Western Europe in the past few decades, but in Hungary and Greece support recently swelled for parties even further to the right. In the last few years, Jobbik in Hungary and Golden Dawn in Greece have gone from fringe extremists with no electoral power to parties with seats in national and European parliaments. Though the rise of the radical right as a Europe-wide phenomenon was unexpected, the successes of Jobbik and Golden Dawn are especially surprising because these parties are much more extreme than other successful far right groups. Golden Dawn is anti-immigrant, Jobbik is anti-Roma, and both parties are anti-Semitic. They explicitly use symbols, language, and tactics that evoke the fascists of the 1930s and 1940s. These parties are growing and their success directly contradicts previous scholarship on the radical right.

In this thesis I address the anomalous successes of Jobbik and Golden Dawn and present a new party family type called nationalist extremists. In addition to creating this party group, I formulate a theoretical framework to explain the factors that make nationalist extremist success a possibility. Finally, I present comprehensive reviews of Jobbik and Golden Dawn's histories, ideologies, and activities in order to demonstrate their unique spots in the far right party pantheon.

Chapter 1. Introduction

A member of parliament proposes making a list of the country's Jews on the grounds that they pose a threat to national security. On the floor of parliament, a group of MPs greet their party chairman with their right arms held out stiffly, palms down. Groups of uniformed men march in formation through ethnic minority neighborhoods. Though these instances of extremism could easily match occurrences in Nazi Germany and other fascist countries during the interwar period and World War II, they come from present-day Hungary and Greece. This conduct is a mere taste of the extremist rhetoric and actions perpetuated by the Hungarian party Jobbik – currently the third-largest party in Hungarian Parliament – and the Greek party Golden Dawn – the fifth-largest party in Hellenic Parliament. Jobbik and Golden Dawn are further to the right than any elected parties in Europe since the interwar fascists and they represent a threat to minority groups in Hungary and Greece and to the democratic nature of these countries more generally.

This paper addresses how Jobbik and Golden Dawn were able to win votes given their extremist nature. In the second chapter, I define a new party type called nationalist extremists to clarify the unique position in the far right party arena that Jobbik and Golden Dawn hold, and in the third chapter I review scholarship on far right parties and present my own theory for how nationalist extremists are able to achieve electoral success. The fourth and fifth chapters are exhaustive analyses of Jobbik and Golden Dawn respectively and act as empirical case studies that validate the party definition given in chapter two and the theoretical framework presented in chapter three.

Up until 2009 – the year Jobbik exceeded expectations by getting almost fifteen percent of the vote in the European Parliamentary elections – scholars studying the European far right had asserted that blatant racism, an association with a fascist past, and extra-political violence were insurmountable barriers to electoral success.¹ Though Jobbik and Golden Dawn’s electoral performances have proven these premises false, there has yet to be any scholarship devoted to conceptualizing a theoretical framework that can explain their phenomenal and previously unimaginable successes. While there have been scattered scholarly efforts to theorize on the success of Jobbik and Golden Dawn separately, no work analyzes the two parties as iterations of a larger phenomenon. Similarly, no serious effort has been made to clear the terminological thicket that has grown up around the two parties. The media has alternately referred to them as neo-Nazi, neo-fascist, extreme right, ultranationalist, and a host of other names.² This etymological puzzle is addressed and solved in the second chapter of this paper, where it is argued that Jobbik and Golden Dawn represent a new type of European party that must be conceptualized outside of the now-unsuitable far right framework.

Implicit in the assertion that Jobbik and Golden Dawn’s successes merit explanation is the idea that they represent a political party type distinct from the radical right. Since many scholars have already advanced theories to explain the success of the radical right, if Jobbik and Golden Dawn were mere children of this party family, there would be no need to create the theoretical framework that is integral to this thesis. In order to show Jobbik and Golden Dawn’s uniqueness and thereby legitimate this research, I present the main tenets of radical right party definitions in chapter two. I systematically go through these definitions to demonstrate that Jobbik and Golden Dawn do not qualify as radical right parties because of their blatant biological racism, use of violence, and associations with a fascist past. I also highlight those pieces of

scholarship that assert that parties with the characteristics of Jobbik and Golden Dawn are by definition not of the radical right.

After establishing that Jobbik and Golden Dawn belong to a party group distinct from the radical right, I present my definition of a new group called nationalist extremists and expand upon this term's definition and the reasons for its creation. To validate this new term, I demonstrate not only that both Jobbik and Golden Dawn meet this definition, but that traditional radical right parties, such as the French National Front, do not.

Although I find Jobbik and Golden Dawn to be separate from the radical right, I begin the third chapter with a summary and synthesis of scholarship on the radical right in order to introduce possible theories for nationalist extremist success. After evaluating different hypotheses, I address this thesis' central question: why Jobbik and Golden Dawn were able to gain significant vote shares despite their extremism. This larger inquiry involves numerous smaller questions, such as whether economic conditions played a role, whether party structure was a factor, and so on. Because no single cause is sufficient to explain Jobbik and Golden Dawn's success, I present a causal pathway to elucidate how a number of different variables interact in a way that makes the election of parties such as Jobbik and Golden Dawn a possibility.

The theory given in the third chapter to explain the anomalous success of Jobbik and Golden Dawn is, in brief, that in countries with suddenly poor and worsening economic conditions and decreasing levels of trust in government, a heightening of ethnic tensions between the majority ethnicity and a widely disliked minority can – when dealt with by the government in a way that a substantial portion of the population finds unsatisfactory – allow a well-organized, extreme, and ethnocentric party that demonstrates its commitments through action, to capture a

significant portion of the electorate. The key and unique feature of this theory is that instead of causing unelectability (as established scholarship on the radical right suggests), the paramilitary/supra-political actions of Jobbik and Golden Dawn are counter-intuitively argued to be precisely the factors that produced their electoral successes. I contend that these activities function as legitimizing agents that – while perhaps repulsing a majority of voters – appeal to a significant minority. However, a party can only gain support with such actions if certain conditions are already present in a country. This caveat and other constituent parts of my theory are explained fully in the third chapter.

In order to validate my hypothesis, I rely on comparative studies of the conditions within Greece and Hungary immediately prior to Jobbik and Golden Dawn's initial electoral breakthroughs. Further, I examine the supra-political actions and rhetoric of these parties to demonstrate the unique way in which they were able to take advantage of peculiar political, social, and economic circumstances. I also provide counter-cases to show the relevancy of certain aspects of my theory and the irrelevancy of some oft-suggested hypotheses for far right success.

The chapters immediately following the explanation of nationalist extremist success are thorough descriptions of Jobbik and Golden Dawn that serve not only to provide the reader with an extensive background on the parties' ideologies and activities, but also to place Jobbik and Golden Dawn in the wider context of their countries' histories. The fourth chapter, dealing with Jobbik and Hungary, and the fifth chapter, discussing Golden Dawn and Greece, provide the necessary details to understand the demand for the creation of a new party family. The evidence presented in these chapters is presaged somewhat by the literature review in the third chapter.

Because the main focus of this paper is why Jobbik and Golden Dawn have been able to achieve electoral success, the reasons such parties exist in the first place will not be discussed. One would be pressed to name a country that does not have an extremist fringe group – the United States has the Ku Klux Klan and most European countries have bands of neo-Nazi radicals. These smaller groups have already been extensively documented and the causes for their existence theorized. This thesis' primary focus is why Jobbik and Golden have not been relegated to electoral insignificance like other extremists. I do not speculate upon the reasons these parties are formed initially.

Another area of far right study is concerned with the factors that determine the continued success of radical parties after their initial electoral breakthrough. While this is an important question to consider in order to fully understand these parties, it goes beyond the scope of this thesis, which is concerned only with the reasons Jobbik and Golden Dawn were elected, not how they performed once in parliament. That said, because relevant details about both parties have emerged in the wake of their electoral successes, there is some discussion of the post-breakthrough experiences of Jobbik and Golden Dawn. However, the fates of the parties are only given passing comment, and not subjected to detailed analysis.

Ultimately, in this thesis I explore an issue that has been inadequately addressed in far right scholarship. In doing so, I provide the key aspects of any piece of scholarship on the radical right: a definition, an explanation, and relevant case studies. Fundamentally, I call for a reevaluation of a significant new development in European politics and identify and fill a theoretical gap.

Chapter 6. Conclusion

The successes of Jobbik and Golden Dawn were a shock even to experienced students of Europe's political scene. For the first time since WWII, parties that embraced paramilitarism had won seats in national parliaments. The conventional wisdom had been that parties embracing supra-political violence and other legacies of the interwar period would be unelectable in established European democracies. While much was said about the breakthrough of these two parties, no academic work was produced that sought to explain Jobbik and Golden Dawn as results of the same phenomenon.

In order to theorize about Jobbik and Golden Dawn's successes, the two parties had to be placed into an international party family. Jobbik and Golden Dawn are clearly different from both radical rightists and fascists – the two groups to which they are most often compared. Because no existing party family fully captured the nature of these parties, a new classification was needed. To properly account for the unique characters of Jobbik and Golden Dawn, I created a new party classification: nationalist extremists. Essentially, nationalist extremist parties are anti-democratic, anti-liberal and use tactics and language reminiscent of interwar fascists in the service of a nationalist outlook that places the ethnicity-based nation as the inheritor of a magnificent tradition.

On the surface, Jobbik and Golden Dawn are obviously united by their extremist rhetoric and actions, and if one delves into the ideologies of the two parties, the fundamental similarities become apparent. At a basic level, Jobbik and Golden Dawn are products of dissatisfaction. Their extreme tactics testify to a disillusion with the accepted methods of political participation and its potential for effecting societal change. Their character is a product not only of

disenchantment with economic and social conditions, but also of a fundamental disagreement with a liberal international tradition they feel is essentially opposed to the nation. Jobbik and Golden Dawn are also identical in the ways in which they exalt the ethnic nation and vilify both non-coethnics within the state and coethnics who are seen as internationalist betrayers of the nation. The parties are united by this fundamental ideological orientation, as well as their use of paramilitarism and espousal of aspects of interwar fascism.

However, in comparing the parties, a few differences emerge. While Jobbik may harken back to a fascist past and make racist appeals, unlike Golden Dawn, it does not directly glorify Nazism. Golden Dawn is also more violent than Jobbik – its paramilitarism extends to explicit acts of violence, whereas Jobbik stops just short of actual physical assaults. However, despite these differences, what unites the two parties is much more important than what divides them. Fundamentally, Jobbik and Golden Dawn are nationalist extremists, and their dissimilarities are merely details. These disparities certainly do not preclude their inclusion in the same party family.

Evaluating the specific causes of Jobbik and Golden Dawn's initial electoral breakthroughs, one sees a virtually identical pattern. Shortly before these nationalist extremists' first electoral successes, both Hungary and Greece experienced not only increasingly poor economic conditions, but also the implosion of major, established political forces. Further, the collapse of MIÉP in Hungary and LAOS in Greece evacuated the far right space and meant that Jobbik and Golden Dawn did not have to compete with established right-wing parties.

Turning to the specific actions of the parties, one can see how both Jobbik and Golden Dawn engaged in supra-political actions designed to whip up anti-minority sentiment in the areas that were most saturated with members of these minorities. Both parties languished in obscurity

until they began to speak and act against their country's main minority groups. Jobbik and Golden Dawn advocated numerous issues related to their nationalistic outlooks, but it was this shift in focus that allowed the parties to tap into a current of nationalist sentiment that had no political outlet and had been ignored by mainly anti-Semitic parties like MIÉP and LAOS. Though established parties in both countries attempted to coopt this rightist position, anti-minority rhetoric was a natural expression of Jobbik and Golden Dawn's nationalism, whereas other parties struggled to fit it into their larger programs. Centrist parties that attempted to capitalize on the anti-minority dissatisfaction that these parties stirred up could not reach the nationalist extremists' level of issue ownership in these areas. By espousing purposefully inflammatory rhetoric and acting in intentionally provocative ways, the parties legitimized themselves in the eyes of the country's most right-wing voters, and also garnered coverage in the press well beyond what is merited by an upstart party. It was precisely because of this well-timed and well-placed extremism, and not in spite of it, that the parties were able to break out of electoral obscurity.

While the catalyzing effect of economic distress on nationalist extremist success is somewhat apparent and has been addressed in the literature examining Jobbik and Golden Dawn independently, another often overlooked, yet crucial ingredient for nationalist extremist success is political turmoil that largely discredits the established parties. Political crisis creates a situation in which it is vital for newcomer parties to establish themselves not only as outside of the system, but also as legitimate actors. In countries whose crystallized political systems have suddenly experienced flux, rhetoric loses worth. What becomes critical is that a newcomer party establishes that it is willing to do more than make promises – that it is prepared to take action. The paramilitary activities of Jobbik and Golden Dawn demonstrated that their extremist rhetoric

was sincere. Both parties emphasized issues of minority conflict with significant popular support, and by taking extremist action on these issues, Jobbik and Golden Dawn were able to win support from voters with latent nationalist sentiment and a desire for political change. Because they organized into paramilitary bands, Jobbik and Golden Dawn were able to take advantage of a unique set of political and economic circumstances and achieve their electoral breakthroughs.

Notes

¹ See David Art, *Inside the Radical Right: The Development of Anti-Immigrant Parties in Western Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011) and Cas Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), to give just two examples.

² To give just one example of each term: Neo-Nazi: Alan Feuer, "Reported Golden Dawn Sightings Rattle Queens," *New York Times*, October 19, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/21/nyregion/reported-golden-dawn-sightings-rattle-astoria-queens.html?_r=0; Neo-fascist: Apostolos Lakasas, "Church of Greece Split Over Role of Neofascist Golden Dawn Party," *Ekathimerini*, November 8, 2012, http://www.ekathimerini.com/4dcgi/_w_articles_wsite1_1_08/11/2012_469127; Extreme Right: Jane's Country Risk Daily Report, *New Hungarian Extreme Right Party Sparks Prime Minister's Concerns*, August 23, 2007; Ultranationalist: "Golden Dawn Files Defamation Suit Against Leftist MP," *Ekathimerini*, December 17, 2012, http://www.ekathimerini.com/4dcgi/_w_articles_wsite1_1_17/12/2012_474819.

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