

## A De-Radicalization Strategy for Greece: Baby steps back to social common sense

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Violent extremism in Greece in these last recession years has turned into a widespread social phenomenon.

Greek extremism is not a new crisis concept though; Extremist groups such as the “17<sup>th</sup> of November” for instance have been present and defining what “Greek terrorism” is for a long time. The main problem that we can observe nowadays however apart from a radical increase of violent extremism incidents, is its explicit and implicit legitimization by the Greek authorities. Since the 2012 national legislative elections, the collapse of Greek bipartisan system and especially the unexpected strengthening of the far-right Golden Dawn and the radical left (SYRIZA) the Greek political architecture and narrative have undergone major changes. In fact, these parties known for their unorthodox methods had been largely marginalized on the Greek political scene up to that date. Nevertheless, since 2012 and their significant presence in the national Parliament, they are treated by other political forces as the official opposition. This particular position attributes popularity and a great deal of legitimacy to their narrative and their methods.

So the question that should be asked in regard to Greece is how to deal with de-radicalization in a new, unknown and hostile to such ideas environment.

Having tested Sophie Heine’s model<sup>2</sup> of national anti-European political discourse on these two parties mainly responsible for the grave shift of Greek politics since 2012, I came to the conclusion that in fact they both use the same core arguments to accuse both the Greek

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<sup>2</sup> HEINE, Sophie, « Les variantes idéologies des oppositions à l’Union européenne en Allemagne », dans Justine Lacroix et Ramona Coman, *Les résistances à l’Europe*, Edition de l’Université de Bruxelles, 2007, pp.167-186.

government and the European Union for the situation in the country. It is the “blame it on Europe” tactic. Presented in very different ways, they manage to put the burden of responsibility of the economic crisis and the vortex of Greek austerity on two common factors; migration on the one hand and European conspiracy theories against Greek sovereignty on the other hand. The election rates they received in May and June 2012 that constantly grow ever since illustrate the public’s approval of these justifications.

Or do they?

It has been established by several statistics and researches that voters of these political forces do not share, or at least do not fully share, these parties’ ideologies. Hence, what we are really presented here with is the legitimization of a political hatred discourse accompanied by violent methods done through a reaction vote, a negative vote to the traditional parties rather than an approval of radical ideologies.

In my opinion, this is the most significant element to take under consideration when building a de-radicalization (or: Exit) strategy in this environment. Essentially an Exit strategy is targeting individuals and groups. But when it comes to Greece, violent extremism is unavoidably related to the Realpolitik of the country and therefore it is necessary to have a deep knowledge of certain elements in order to create a concrete and viable strategy. If the Greek population was ready to support and embrace a narrative that put in simple words the reasons of what they perceived as suffering due to the crisis simply because it constitutes an alternative to the traditional choices, then maybe this is the road to follow.

Studying the Greek crisis’ statistics, one can easily see that the social categories that have been more severely hit are the low-skilled workers. This social branch is also the one mainly supporting extremist ideas and groups, possibly the most vulnerable one for adhering in them as well. It is not too hard to explain why. At the breakout of the crisis, a new sophisticated economic and political terminology entered the every-day life of Greeks. A

large part of the population was however incapable of understanding these new terms while at the same time seeing the direct consequences of over-taxation and a series of other austerity measures radically influencing its living standards. These people therefore turned to those who put the crisis in simple terms, the extreme parties that were not up to that point part of the national decision-making process. These parties to a large extent use classic white propaganda<sup>3</sup>, in the sense that they use truthful data and information but present them to the public in a manipulative way.

Special attention should be furthermore brought to the fact that especially the far right has gained enormous legitimacy by conducting a sort of police mission for Greek nationals against the “evil and criminal” migrants threatening the national and individual security.<sup>4</sup> They escort Greek citizens when they go to the bank or to do their grocery shopping and “defend” them from foreigners using violence. It would be exaggerated to claim that these people have been fully victimized; building a truly effective Exit Strategy should be the most objective process possible. Therefore, we need to be conscious of the fact that of these political forces were able to sell security from migrants’ delinquency it is because at some degree it was necessary. Nevertheless, the approach we should have concerning this issue is the one of social inclusion, or in this case social exclusion that leads certain individuals to breaking the law.

It is of the utmost importance for people working on the Greek field to be able to make the distinction between “illegality” and “inhumanity”. Illegal actions whether coming from Greek nationals or foreigners should be condemned and punished. On the contrary no person should be considered as less of a human due to his or her race, origin, religious beliefs etc. This statement may seem as common sense to the readers of this article, but during my 4-month field research in Athens, I came to the conclusion that regretfully this is not the case

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<sup>3</sup> MALESEVIC, Sinisa, *The sociology of War and Violence*, Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2010 (Chapter 7, p. 202-233).

<sup>4</sup> HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH, “Greece: Migrants Describe Fear on the Streets”, 10 juillet 2012, <http://www.hrw.org/de/node/108594> (Accessed on May 16th, 2014)

for a disturbingly large number of people in the country. What is more, it is important to note at this level that the Greek police is aware of these methods and does not condemn them. This is one of the most striking concrete examples that one may put forward in order to comprehend the current environment.

Hence, an independent pro-European counter-narrative conducted in the exact same simplified way could generate a reverse effect. One may argue that this strategy already exists and is being conducted by a series of different actors in the country especially in regard to bringing the youth closer to European democratic values. I shall not challenge this argument. However, the initiatives already being put forward are in their large majority targeting the academic community. Without questioning their important social value, these projects unfortunately do not reach the large popular portions that are most vulnerable to violent extremism.

Consequently, as a form of preventive strategy, I would claim that a different approach than the obvious academic one is needed. In other words, this strategy needs to reach out to those people who do not usually attend conferences.

I would suggest that the most effective first step in this direction would be the organization of outdoor sport and cultural events that are accessible to all social categories including lower educated population, currently unemployed population and migrants. Such events can draw media and public attention without being directly targeted by extremist groups as opposing them ideologically. Such events already exist or have taken place in the past drawing mainly positive criticism. I especially refer to the “Agapi (Love) Re Maggiore” annual concert for migrants’ rights that took place for the first last year and is being reiterated this summer or even the “Athens pride” supporting LGBT rights, initiatives carefully chosen on the basis of their political neutrality and pro-Human Rights nature. This kind of events should be intensified and systematized in order to establish a sort of ideological resistance to

extremist narratives. To the extent that it would be possible, a series of such events should be drawn under the umbrella of the Exit or de-radicalization team.

Moreover, these initiatives must be somehow assimilated to the European ideals. Greece has not always been a Eurosceptic country; in the pro-crisis times it was actually one of the most pro-EU Member States in terms of public acceptance of the European integration project. However, since the recession the EU has transformed to the eyes of the Greek public into the economic oppressor responsible for the suffering of the population. Marginalized groups have leaned on this logic and have indeed managed to gain tremendous popularity with such allegations. It is therefore essential to bring back to the general public the “happy face” of the European Union, remind the Greeks why for so long they were in favor of it. The first signs of economic recovery that have recently made their appearance in the media and in the public discourse should facilitate this task.

The latter statement should not complacent the birth of an Exit Strategy; on the contrary, these circumstances must be urgently used in the most strategic way possible. It is now the right time to act without wasting any time and present the Exit Strategy as part of the Greek recovery. In any case, an economic recovery should most definitely be accompanied by a social recovery and this is what an Exit Strategy should be aiming for in such an environment. In a nutshell, what we are trying to achieve in order to have an optimum effectiveness result for a Greek Exit Strategy is a shifting social environment where social inclusion ideas will at least manage to contradict predominant hatred current trends. It is all about bringing the colorful and bright Europe back to the Greek reality, a Europe that stands first of all in favor of social inclusion. This is exactly what is lacking right now from the Greek social common sense, this is the basis where the hatred ideologies are built and publicly accepted upon.

Once enough attention has been drawn upon these activities, then and only then the core de-radicalization process can come into the picture. In my opinion, integrating the Exit Strategy in a more generalized economic and social recovery framework could be precious

on a number of levels; first, it would be a way out of negative and even maybe violent criticism by the targeted political forces. Second, it could gradually subscribe as a governmental program. Among the priorities set by the Greek agenda for the current presidency of the European Council we are able to trace “Growth-Jobs-Cohesion”.<sup>5</sup> Of course, the Greek government mainly targets financial and economic goals with this issue. Nevertheless, I am persuaded that with the correct mindset and the right individuals to lobby such an idea, the program could even go under governmental endorsement in order to ensure social cohesion and hence, when the actual de-radicalization kicks in the program can enjoy the same degree of legitimacy and safety as those who will most definitely oppose it.

The Radicalization Awareness Network of the European Commission has informed me that the Greek government is being reluctant in joining efforts for the implementation of an Exit strategy as part of their counter terrorism national strategy. This attitude is probably caused by the fear that in the current political Greek environment such initiative may have a political cost due to the legitimacy extremist forces enjoy. A shifting environment may give the necessary space to lobby in favor of a Greek official participation in such a program. At that point, a more traditional de-radicalization approach can come in the picture.

I am fully aware of the fact that my strategy proposal is a mild one. But my understanding of the Greek reality leads me to believe that a more dynamic launch of an Exit program is too risky. Criticism to such a project, both positive and negative is of course expected. But if the criticism is too harsh from the very beginning, it is highly possible that the project will fail due to the fear of political cost of supporting such a program.

Since political forces represented in the Parliament are legitimizing extremist groups, attention must be brought upon the fact that it will be unforgiving to challenge ideologies as such in the first place. The launching of the Greek Exit Strategy has to be presented as an

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<sup>5</sup> *Greek presidency official website*, <http://www.gr2014.eu/eu-presidency/the-greek-presidency/programme-and-priorities> (Accessed on May 16th, 2014)

alternative to violent extremist actions in order to be socially accepted. Special attention must be brought upon the narrative put forward by the program; as sense as it may make to most people that extremism in Greece finds its current origins within political parties, the fact is that no matter the deficiencies, the Greek system remains a democratic one and those parties have been placed in the Parliament by the national vote. Hence, a strict line should be drawn and the distinction must necessarily be as clear-cut as possible between extremist actions and groups and political ideology. Direct attack on political parties would simply be operational suicide for this program.

Moreover, and this may be an important detail, the word "Exit" should be avoided. In the contemporary Greek vocabulary, the word "Exit" has been strongly combined to the public debate of exiting the Eurozone or even the EU. Therefore, I would suggest an alternative to it, such as "Cohesion" or "Inclusion" strategy.

Greece has been through a lot these last years and has severely suffered not only on an economic level but also on the social scale. Violent changes of living standards have driven many Greek nationals into supporting unconventional forces through reaction. A lot of the country's common sense has been lost. But we should always keep in mind that these are social phenomena grown under special circumstances of high international and domestic pressure. Nevertheless, action should be taken the soonest possible so that now with the beginning of the Greek recovery, they can be tackled and eliminated. Otherwise, there is always the possibility that they are well rooted in the newborn post-crisis Greek mentality and the more we ignore them, the harder it would be to fight them back in the long run. The Greek Exit Strategy must therefore start getting implemented in the shortest of delays by a group of individuals able to comprehend the Greek mindset and the individuality and uniqueness of the Greek case. In my recent visit in Athens, I witnessed a society being born through its own ashes. Greece is a phoenix and an Exit program is without a doubt a valuable contribution to this process but with respect to its special needs at least in regard to its introduction to the field.

To sum up, the Exit Strategy should therefore consist of three different steps:

- Creation of a pro-European counter-narrative independent from any mainstream national or European authority (at least visibly) aiming to prevent further spreading of extremism.
- Lobbying to the Greek government to take part in the Radicalization Awareness Network of the European Commission aiming to eventually de-legitimize violent extremism in the country.
- Implementation of de-radicalization good practices such as family counseling aiming to draw people out from extremist groups.



**Sources :**

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