

UPDATE ON NEO-NAZI POLITICAL PARTIES IN EUROPE

Robin Shepherd

PREAMBLE

Since the report on neo-Nazi parties in Europe was presented to the World Jewish Congress's conference in Budapest earlier this year, there have been a number of developments. But there is no evidence that any of the parties in focus have renounced their core values. In the case of Hungary in particular there is a vital time dynamic to be considered, in that elections are due in April or May next year.

This afternoon's presentation will help form the basis of a new update to be spread far and wide so as to keep this issue on the international agenda, and to elicit significant continued action from the WJC itself, its allies, and governments in Europe and around the world.

It is planned that the new report should not simply be an update to the material already presented, though that is crucial, but should also be wider in scope bringing in new countries and new modes of understanding. The WJC has already looked at Greece and Hungary in some detail; less so with regards to Bulgaria and Ukraine, for example.

Questions of scope and timing for the update have yet to be finalized.

Here is a primer for the discussion on latest events in Greece, Hungary, Bulgaria and Ukraine.

GREECE

In September, Nikos Mihaloliakos, the leader of Golden Dawn, and two other Golden Dawn members of parliament were arrested in the wake of the stabbing to death of an anti-racist activist (not for committing the crime itself, one must stress). That stabbing has seen Golden Dawn's support fall sharply in opinion polls. However, it retains 6-7 percent public support. This is a significant decline compared with the 10-14 percent the party enjoyed prior to the widely reported murder referred to above.

However, the Greek Jewish community remains deeply concerned that a hard core of the Greek party, with enough support to enter parliament on a consistent basis remains.

In the very last news, last week, six Golden Dawn deputies were stripped of their immunity by parliament. A Supreme Court prosecutor has defined Golden Dawn as a criminal organization, and this development may be crucial. Polls show that eight out of 10 Greek citizens think that criminal charges should be brought against Golden Dawn's leaders. This issue has received widespread coverage in the international media.

Greece's economic crisis continues, with the economy expected to decline by 4-5 percent again in 2013. Golden Dawn is perhaps the most notorious of the resurgent neo-Nazi parties in Europe with its leaders using the right-arm Nazi

salute at rallies and employing extreme, anti-Semitic and anti-immigrant rhetoric.

HUNGARY

In Hungary, the key focus of attention over the extreme, neo-Nazi party Jobbik is next spring's parliamentary election. At the 2010 elections, the party achieved approximately 17 percent of the vote. However, Fidesz, the party of rightist Prime Minister Viktor Orban was strong enough to govern alone following those elections. But given that Fidesz has seen a significant decline in its support, it is of material importance to know whether Jobbik will be in a position to become a junior partner in the next Hungarian government, and whether Mr. Orban would choose such a path were it presented to him.

The very latest opinion polls show the following on the basis of the whole population: Fidesz at 26 percent; the opposition socialists on 16 percent; Jobbik on 6 percent. No other party, according to the poll by the respected IPSOS agency, would cross the 5 percent threshold for parliamentary representation. This makes the electoral situation highly ambiguous. In theory, a government could be formed, on the basis of such numbers, out of Fidesz and Jobbik. But the size of the undecided section of the population - 43 percent in this poll - is so large, that it is hard to form a clear judgment. At the very least, the state in Hungary can be described as precarious.

Whether, in any event, Mr. Orban would opt for a formal coalition seems unlikely given some his commitments and given the enormous international condemnation such a move would attract. However, Jobbik could play a role as a silent supporter of the government from the opposition, in which case the party and its agenda would be in a position to extract political concessions as a price.

An additional and more general issue to consider is that more traditional rightist forces in Hungary may be gaining (while Jobbik declines) precisely by adopting aspects of the Jobbik agenda. This should put us on our guard to observe the details as well as the general picture.

BULGARIA

Fresh from a week in which the far-Right (and ominously named) Ataka party almost literally launched an attack on political opponents in the Bulgarian parliament --a fist fight was narrowly avoided--political uncertainty remains. Ataka, which offers silent support to the government from the opposition benches, has seen its support fall in opinion polls to below the 4 percent threshold necessary for parliamentary representation. Analysts suggest this is precisely because of its support for an unpopular government. Should it withdraw that support, its own popularity could rise again, as the government itself potentially falls.

Ataka was formed in 2005 by the radical political firebrand Volen Siderov. It adopts a socialist-nationalist agenda and advocates re-nationalisation of former state enterprises combined with hostility to Jews, Muslims (the country has a large Muslim minority), Turks, Roma, and non-white immigrants in general.

In brief, such is the situation in Bulgaria today. But just as there is a view of Bulgaria to take account of, there is a view from Bulgaria which urges de-emphasising the alleged centrality of national characteristics in understanding what we are dealing with.

For, where is the borderline between nationalism and fascism, this thin borderline, which today, when breached, we call neo-Nazi? Why are some parties and political movements in France and England considered nationalistic, whilst the same behavior and rhetoric in Greece and Ukraine is defined as neo-Nazi? Where is the difference?

Beyond any doubt the reason for the emergence and the social significance of these political movements is economic, regardless of whether we consider prosperous Germany or economically poor Bulgaria.

In analyzing the neo-Nazi phenomenon one may well conclude that it would be intrinsically false to emphasize national characteristics only, because such political movements exist not only in the above mentioned countries but throughout Europe --the Baltics, Scandinavia, Italy (what about the ban/prohibition of Shechita in Poland, the problems with the Brit in Sweden?)

UKRAINE

When, in the parliamentary elections, the ultra-radical Svoboda (Freedom) party achieved over 10 percent of the vote, there was widespread consternation. Svoboda was founded in 1991 as a social-nationalist party of Ukraine. The main slogan of the party is "The time has come to return Ukraine to the Ukrainians" and it aims its "struggle", inter alia, against a so-called "zhido-moskalski" mafia, which is allegedly ruling today's Ukraine.

The underlying reasons for Svoboda's appeal to some Ukrainians are a combination of historic anti-Semitism, socio-economic dislocation and bitterness and disillusion with existing political parties. This is not an uncommon mixture in such cases. Some analysts also suggest that Svoboda has prospered due to the support of the ruling Party of the Regions which sought to create division within the Ukrainian-speaking constituencies headed by former Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko: a classic divide and rule strategy.

Today the most explicit representative of the anti-Semitic and also neo-Nazi component of the ideology of Svoboda is Ukrainian Parliamentarian Yuri Mikhaltchishin, known especially for describing the Holocaust as "a bright period in the history of Europe"

The Ukrainian situation is complicated in a more general sense because since the Orange Revolution, if not before, Ukraine has been seen as a battleground state nestled awkwardly between the Western euro-Atlantic structures and an increasingly emboldened Russia. In terms of impacting upon events in Ukraine there is thus a geo-strategic dimension that does not necessarily affect other countries up for discussion and consideration.