

Challenging the Draconian Politics of Economic Austerity. Is Europe Ripe for Revolution?

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Global Research, March 06, 2013

Region: [Europe](#)

Theme: [Global Economy](#), [Poverty & Social Inequality](#)

The question may not seem so far-fetched, as recent events have shown, the old continent is now confronted with ever (that is since the financial crisis first struck in 2008) deepening social fractures which have led to widening political instability.

Throughout the EU, countries such as Italy, Portugal, Greece, Ireland, Spain and the latest state faced with a banking crisis or “financial meltdown”, that is Cyprus are all teetering on the edge of an economic abyss. What ails these euro zone states? It’s the draconian politics of austerity. These low or no growth remedies imposed by non-elected officials have led to the fall of governments in the so called EU “core countries” including now Italy. New actors have emerged to take on the effete elite. The Beppe Grillo political phenomenon has sent a deafeningly loud message to the establishment.

Massively, austerity with its adjunct deep social cuts, wage squeezes and endless “structural reforms”, has been rejected at the polling booth. The satirist cum politician, has not only provided some much needed comic relief to a deeply discontented populace, but he has also given vent to anger, or deep seated frustration with the out-going technocratic government of Mario Monti. In the wake of the national elections, Italy seems destined to return back to an era of short lived coalition and chronic instability which characterized the political life of the country in the post-world war years. But much more worrisome for the Brussels “commissars” is what’s happening in the Balkans. Over there we might be seeing the beginnings of a really “civil society” led, yet not so peaceful revolution.

Balkans Spring?

Do events in Bulgaria mirror those of the Arab spring? Has the violence in North Africa crossed the Mediterranean via Greece to Bulgaria? Yes it has, indeed. The confrontations between police and protestors in places like Varna and Sophia (sparked by rising energy costs, stagnant wages etc.) have rocked the region to the same extend as those in Egypt or Tunisia. And like in North Africa, the government in Sophia has fallen fast in the wake of popular unrest.

The death this week of Plamen Goranov due to self-immolation in Bulgaria is not unlike the protests actions of Mohamed Bonazizi, the Tunisian street vendor whose desperate act triggered massive demonstrations in his country, which later spread throughout the Maghreb. Whatever similarities there might be between these dramatic events in history, the suicidal yet symbolic act of one man in Varna, has ignite done more powder keg in another highly volatile part of the world which is the Balkans; an area which as we all know, was a flashpoint of a conflict which sparked the outbreak of the First World War and also was

the venue of the ex-Yugoslavia war. Both wars altered the geopolitical face of Europe forever. And will likely do so again soon if the instability there continues.

Oxymoron: EU peace prize in times of great social, economic and political unrest on the continent

Where this growing popular unrest is leading *is* hard to tell. But one thing seems sure: the EU is faced with widening instability not only in core states, but also in those on its periphery. That is the instability has spread beyond the Eurozone to the non-Eurozone states as well; or to Bulgaria, one of the newest member states but also one of its poorest. There is an explosive cocktail of dire poverty, widespread corruption and criminality known as “mafianomics” there, which characterizes both the country and the region. This is not helpful. But then neither are the policies of the troika: EU, IMF and European Central Bank. These policies devised in Brussels, Washington and Frankfurt are destabilizing not only Mediterranean anymore, but Europe and the Balkans as well. Europe’s underbelly is on fire. How long will it take before the conflagration reaches the EU’s inner core: that is France, and then Germany?

Will the widening social protests against austerity lead to a continent wide revolution as it did in 1848? Perhaps not, but the EU is faced with permanent fragmentation into blocs composed of “haves and have not” states which is reminiscent of pre-war and pre-revolutionary Europe. An unpalatable prospect indeed, for an institution which won the Nobel peace prize in 2012.

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