

As riots and violent disorder continue to spread across Europe, Amir Lechner examines the underlying causes and finds economic woes are just the catalyst for deeper structural problems



SPREADING DISORDER

Facing debts it was no longer able to hide, the Greek government implemented a series of austerity measures in early 2010, attempting to bring its spending more in line with its tax income. Proposals included pay cuts for state employees, some tax raises, and a freeze on pensions. The public response to these measures was chaos: massive protests, involving tens of thousands of people, clogged the streets and effectively shut down businesses and transport centers in Athens and Thessaloniki. While the majority of the demonstrations were relatively peaceful, angry youths started skirmishes with riot police, causing injuries and property damage.

What might seem at first to be a disproportionate reaction to objectively modest fiscal decisions has much deeper roots. Most Greeks regard their government as being corrupt and ineffectual; many seem to regard it as their patriotic duty to cheat on their taxes as much as possible. With a significant portion of the economy occurring in a tax-free, cash-only grey market, the government has been hard pressed to maintain a high level of services, leading to budget deficits. Due to European Union budget regulations (as well as local political machinations) these deficits were hidden for many years, allowing the nation to show a patina of health to

the world.

Further complicating the issue is an oft-overlooked statistic that is nevertheless critical to determining a nation's stability: youth unemployment. Overall unemployment in Greece is 8.3 per cent, roughly in keeping with the Eurozone average. Unemployment among those in their teens and early 20s is approximately 30 per cent, however. Relative poverty, the feeling of powerlessness and simple boredom create an environment where the slightest spark can trigger youth riots as an expression of that pent-up anger. This has proven true again and again, regardless of time or culture. The spark can be economic or religious

– whether a teenager is shot by police or university rights are restricted, the results are often identical. In cases where the youths are genuinely oppressed, this can lead to rapid social progress and the overthrow of tyranny. In many other cases, it simply leads to violence, economic disruption and property damage. Greece itself has seen both extremes. In 1974, student riots helped kick off the movement that overthrew the military junta then ruling the country. In 2008, youths protesting police brutality specifically targeted businesses for arson and vandalism, as well as clashing with the police themselves.

It would be easy to dismiss this as a

Greek crisis. Partially to stave off panic and ensure the stability of the Euro, much of the conversation in Europe has focused around the specifics of the Greek problem: the deals made with US finance giants to hide debt, poor fiscal responsibility and corruption. Greece is only the tip of the iceberg, however, reflecting inherent weaknesses in the current incarnation of the 16-nation Eurozone.

With 16 nations exclusively utilising the same currency, the actions of one can have a deep and immediate effect on all the others. The Euro profits from the stability of Germany and suffers from the economic woes of Greece. And yet, while it is clearly in Germany's short-term interest to stabilise Greece, it would set a dangerous precedent for other indebted Eurozone countries.

Many other European nations are also facing serious fiscal problems. Just on the immediate horizon, Spain, Ireland, and Italy all have high rates of either budget deficits, total debt or both. France's relatively balanced budget relies on notably optimistic predictions about its economic future; should those projections turn out to be less than accurate, it too could find itself in crisis.

In many of these countries, the economic woes have another dimension: racial tension. In boom times, countries are flooded with immigrants hoping to take advantage of readily available work. When times are bad, however, immigrants are frequently viewed as "stealing" jobs from unemployed or underemployed citizens.

Unsurprisingly, the countries experiencing the worst of the economic problems also have the highest youth unemployment figures. Italy, Ireland, and France, for example, all have youth unemployment exceeding 25 per cent. Spain's is the highest in the G-20, at over 35 per cent. During the 2008 Greek riots, youths in many of these countries had "sympathy" riots resulting in the destruction of property and vandalism, underlining how common problems produced the same result, regardless of distance or culture. With the variables of economic performance, youth unemployment and racial tensions in mind, certain countries are facing rapidly rising risk of mass civil disturbance – most

notably Spain and Italy.

Spain's economic recession has dragged on far beyond many other Eurozone countries, with the International Monetary Fund not predicting its end until 2011. Overall unemployment is nearing 20 per cent – double the EU average. Its youth unemployment is a staggering 40 per cent. Much like the United States, Spain profited from a housing boom in the earlier part of the decade which allowed its people to grow used to a higher standard of living, with increased government services and relatively low unemployment. Spain has responded to this crisis well, instituting jobs programmes that, while increasing short-term interest to stabilise Greece, it would set a dangerous precedent for other indebted Eurozone countries. As with all jobs programmes, however, the money spent is immediate, while the economic impact could take years to manifest.

In the meantime, Spain faces the twin risks of unemployed youths and a substantial immigrant workforce. Even before the current economic troubles began, Spain saw sizable anti-immigrant protests and counter-protests. In 2000, anti-immigrant rioters burned down a recycling factory. January 2007 saw several violent clashes between Spanish and immigrant youth gangs in Madrid. In 2008, immigrants protesting poor living conditions and perceived abuses by non-immigrants clashed with police and set fire to homes.

Spain was also among the first countries to see sympathy riots in reaction to the 2008 youth rioting in Greece, with several hundred rioters damaging property and clashing with police. Should Spain's jobs programme prove insufficient to rapidly sate both its increasingly unemployed youth and its large migrant population, it will face a significant risk of civil disturbance.

While its overall economic future is brighter, Italy is currently in a very similar situation to Greece, with rising debt, a shrinking economy and growing unemployment mixed with a notoriously unstable government. With inflation on the rise, economic pressures are increasing and the government has been forced to respond with severe austerity measures.

Italy's focus has been on preserving ►



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Strike one: violent disorder has spread across Greece in response to government economic measures

► its banks and economic system, leading to widespread anger at the lack of emphasis on job creation. Thus far, the public has mainly expressed its anger via protests against the Berlusconi administration. Large unions have managed to effectively shut down the country for short periods of time, disrupting airports and other forms of transportation.

As with Spain, Italy's immigrant workers have a history of rioting and protesting due to poor quality of living. In January 2010, immigrants in southern Italy rioted for two days after two of their number were allegedly shot with air guns by locals. Storefronts and vehicles were vandalised, and between the immigrant rioting and retaliatory attacks by locals, more than 70 people were injured. A mafia killing in 2008 triggered race riots near Naples, resulting in the destruction of vehicles

and smashing of storefront windows. Chinese immigrants began a small riot in Milan in 2007, destroying a single vehicle and leading to several injuries.

While the recent union strikes and protests have been largely peaceful, the risk in Italy stems from the harsh conflict between Italian youths and immigrants. Many of the above incidents were triggered by Italian youths attacking immigrants. As Italy's economic woes result in more unemployed in both groups, attacks leading to mass violence are increasingly probable.

Borrowing from many an ancient philosopher, the British Security Service has a maxim: society is four meals away from anarchy. While this is obviously speaking to the extreme, it does underline the relationship between economic stability and domestic security. Regardless of how peaceful

and civilised a culture might be today, economic hardship can in an instant expose fear and anger simmering under the surface of civilisation. The young strike out at their elders, locals strike out at foreigners; a cycle of retaliation is all too easy to begin, and can take decades to end.

Any long-term solution to the European Union's plight needs to take these factors into account: that the security and stability of Europe as a whole is deeply affected by its least stable member. Economically retreating into old borders might mean creating and exposing oneself to intractable problems in one's neighbours. Until the EU begins making serious headway in the issues of immigrant-related racism and youth unemployment, even short-term economic troubles have the potential to cause widespread strikes, protests, and rioting. **I**