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Europe's Woes Spark Grass-Roots Political Push

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ical system plagued by allegations of cronyism, secrecy and embezzlement, many Spaniards are turning to grass-roots activism.

The number of Spaniards involved in political activity other than voting or joining street demonstrations grew to 39% in 2010 from 27% in 2008, according to the latest data from the London-based European Social Survey.

The fervor is driven by the pain of Spain's recession, including its 27.2% jobless rate, and a sense that many political leaders got rich during a real-estate boom that went bust in 2008. Since then, criminal investigations have unfolded in nearly every major Spanish city and targeted every level of government.

Upstarts are trying to snatch support from two dominant national parties by promising greater openness and better management. If an election were held today, the Union for Progress and Democracy, an alliance of progressive and conservative clean-government forces, would win 13.1% of the vote, nearly tripling its tally in the November 2011 election, according to a May survey by independent Spanish polling firm Metroscopia. Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy's Popular Party would get 22.5%, losing nearly half its support.

Other parts of Europe in recession are experiencing invigorated citizen engagement and electing leaders who attack wasteful spending.

Italy's antiestablishment Five Star Movement, led by comedian Beppe Grillo, got almost a quarter of the vote in February's national election following a campaign for better governance. Five months earlier it won the largest share of the vote in Sicily's regional assembly election and made good on an austerity pledge: Its 15 elected representatives are donating 70% of their €8,000, or about \$10,000, monthly salaries to a fund to extend credit to small and medium-size companies.

The Greek city of Thessaloniki cut costs after Yannis Boutaris, a businessman-turned-politician, took office in late 2010 and ended City Hall's relationship with a few selected providers. Competitive bidding has saved the city 80% of its previous spending on accounting, 25% on waste disposal trucks and 20% on printer paper. The

savings have allowed Mr. Boutaris to spend more on social services, even while cutting taxes and paying down City Hall's debt to suppliers.

Grass-roots pressure is strong in Spain, particularly in local initiatives to open city government to public scrutiny. Thirty-three of Spain's 110 biggest cities scored top grades last year on Transparency International's transparency index, up from one in 2008. The regional government of Navarra last year enacted the country's first open-records law; Spain's central government is drafting a similar bill.

Official perks are getting cut. In Castilla-La Mancha, the cash-strapped regional government has auctioned off dozens of official cars and marked more than 400 for future sale. In Ontinyent, a small city in the Valencia region, an administration that includes clean-government activists shut down a public television station that critics say had become the former mayor's mouthpiece.

Spaniards emerged from the nearly 40 years of Gen. Francisco Franco's dictatorship in 1975 with little experience in grass-roots organization. Post-Franco political elites formed a few dominant parties that called themselves democratic but eschewed direct election of leaders. The system reinforced stability, historians say, but dulled civic engagement.

"Until now, Spain's political parties didn't have the incentives to take corruption too seriously because voters didn't really punish them for it while the economy grew," said Fernando Jiménez, an expert on government corruption at the University of Murcia. The backlash has taken many forms. A group called Record Your City Council Meeting makes video recordings of public meetings and posts them online, risking fines where such reporting is banned. Activists secured more than 1.4 million signatures for a relaxation of Spain's strict home-finance laws, prompting Parliament to reconsider them.

"People are becoming aware that they need to participate in institutions to make them more democratic," said Mario Cuellar, a member of the video-recording group. "We need to reclaim politics from the chorizos," using a slang term for thieves.

Torrelocondes seemed an unlikely place for a reformist insur-



'I was so indignant seeing what these people had been doing with everyone's money as if it were their own.'

ELENA BIURRUN, MAYOR OF TORRELOCONDOS, SPAIN

gency—a well-to-do bedroom community of about 22,000, 18 miles northwest of Madrid. Gen. Franco vacationed in a hilltop palace here. The conservative Popular Party ran the town for a generation starting in 1987.

And Ms. Biurrun seemed an unlikely insurgent. The daughter of film editors, she had grown up elsewhere in the Madrid region, studied law and moved here in 2000. After working as a publicist, she had opted to stay home with her two young children while helping her uncle write radio scripts.

In 2005 she complained about the sewage spilling into a stream near her house. Bureaucrats at Town Hall dismissed her, she said, but she continued going there twice a week.

By the time the spill was stopped months later, Ms. Biurrun found another target: a proposed 1,400-home development and golf course on government-protected forest land near her house.

More than 300 families joined her environmental group and crowded town council meetings with green handkerchiefs on their necks to protest the proposed development. Stymied, they formed the Neighbors for Torrelocondos party and won four of the council's 17 seats in the 2007 election, forming an opposition to long-time Mayor Carlos Galbeño of the Popular Party.

"Ultimately, you have to tackle politics on the same footing as the politicians," said Rosa Rivet, one of the environmental group's founders.

The Neighbors called Mr. Galbeño's administration a symbol of waste and secrecy. A town employee chauffeured the mayor in a leased black Volkswagen Passat with a police escort. A black rope blocked access to his office. He convened council meetings in the morning, when fewer working people could attend.

Facing opposition from the Neighbors, Mr. Galbeño dropped a proposal to raise his own salary by 35%, to €91,445 (\$117,400) a year, and later trimmed his salary by 7.5%. But he and his allies blocked other Neighbors' initiatives, including one to broadcast council meetings live, according to meeting transcripts.

The fight over the planned mega-development came to a head. Eventually, the project was dropped. The Madrid regional government said it violated environmental regulations.

Mr. Galbeño didn't stand for re-election in 2011 under pressure from his party, said Javier Laorden, who replaced him on the ticket. A judge at a court near Madrid is investigating allegations by former Popular Party council members that Mr. Galbeño spied on members of the council. He declined to comment on his record as mayor; his lawyer said the spying allegations were false.

In May that year the Popular Party swept most municipal elections in Spain, but not in Torrelocondos. Ms. Biurrun and other Neighbors campaigned door-to-door with pledges to cut costs and to make government more transparent. They won nine seats on the now 21-member council and picked up support from two parties that had won a seat apiece, securing Ms. Biurrun's election as mayor.

At her inauguration Ms. Biurrun choked up before a jubilant crowd.

Then she began slashing away. She lowered the mayor's salary by 21%, to €49,500 a year, trimmed council members' salaries and eliminated four paid advisory positions.

She got rid of the police escort and the leased car, and gave the chauffeur a different job. She returned a carpet, emblazoned with the town seal, that had cost nearly €300 a month to clean. She ordered council members to pay for their own meals at work events instead of billing the town.

"I was so indignant seeing

what these people had been doing with everyone's money as if it were their own," Ms. Biurrun said.

Those cuts, combined with savings achieved by renegotiating contracts for garbage pickup and other services, helped give a million-euro boost to the city treasury in her first year in office. That enabled her to limit the kind of painful austerity forced on other Spanish communities; the town preserved psychological counseling services for about 20 children, for example, even while cutting it for about 50 adults.

Town Hall's accounts now go online every three months, a practice relatively uncommon in Spain. Citizens may ask questions at council meetings, which Ms. Biurrun moved to evenings and arranged to have transmitted live on the radio and online. Her government has reactivated citizen

reports documented the felling of 71 pine trees to make way for a bike lane.

Ms. Biurrun's administration withdrew Town Hall advertising from La Voz—reprisal, Mr. Estalayo said, for the paper's reporting. He said the previous administration once pulled its ads for the same reason. Ángel Guirao, the council member now in charge of communications, said the ads were more cost-effective in a publication with wider circulation.

Last year the mayor alienated the Socialists and Actúa, the minority parties that helped elect her, by aligning with her old nemesis, the Popular Party, behind a regional government water- and sewage-management plan. The minority parties abhorred the plan, which would privatize the town's services and raise water bills slightly. The mayor said the town had no other practical option and would get €1.3 million for badly needed sewer repairs.

Then there was the tempest over Torrelocondos' medieval tower.

In December, Ricardo Roquero, chairman of a local cultural association, was giving schoolchildren a tour when he saw workers drilling on the tower's walls and asked, "What on Earth are you doing?"

They were wrapping the tower in a giant red canvas with a white bow. Town Hall had conjured up a Christmas campaign called "Gift yourself Torrelocondos" to draw publicity and visitors.

Many townspeople voiced outrage. A historic monument was being pierced with two-inch metal screws for an advertising stunt.

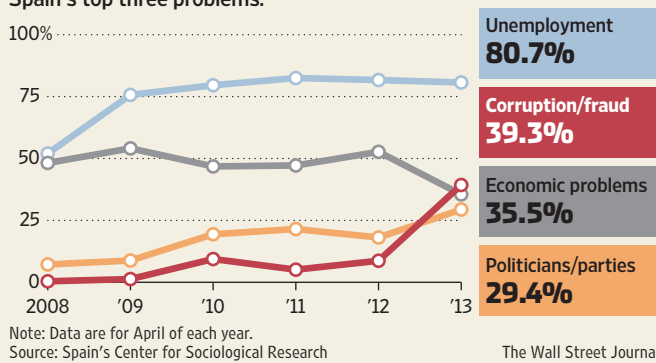
The Neighbors acknowledge that they had failed to get a regional government permit. But they brushed off the criticism. Ms. Biurrun said the resulting press coverage more than compensated for the project's €26,000 cost.

Despite his reservations, Mr. Roquero said he welcomes the new government: "I'm very critical of the Neighbors, but with the situation that Spain is in, what's worth more—the breath of fresh air these people represent, or their inevitable errors? For me, it's the idea that any citizen can influence public life."

—Nektaria Stamouli in Athens and Gilles Castonguay in Milan contributed to this article.

Corruption Becomes a Growing Concern

Corruption has become Spaniards' second-biggest concern amid a nationwide spate of scandals. Percentage who rank these among Spain's top three problems:



Note: Data are for April of each year. Source: Spain's Center for Sociological Research

The Wall Street Journal

Elena Biurrun, left, mayor of Torrelocondos, checks a map showing the location of a planned high-end housing development with council members Raquel Fernández and Santiago Fernández.



Fans Lose Their Heads in Pursuit of Daft Punk Helmets

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also had "a large head." Mr. Bates, a stagehand, said it was fortunate the band's new album and impending tour were coinciding with his "finally having a job" so that he could afford the helmet of his dreams. "That being said I am not a millionaire and I can be picky," he added.

The market for knockoff Daft Punk helmets emerged just over a decade ago, after the electronic music pioneers commissioned a California special-effects company to create a pair of helmets with programmable LED displays for the release of their second album, "Discovery."

Photographs of the pair in their helmets appeared in French magazines a month before the "Discovery" album: Mr. de Homem-Christo's was gold and featured a rainbow-flanked smiley face in lights; Mr. Bangalter's was silver with a narrow red visor. He is the taller of the two.

Thousands of tiny wires cascaded like thick hairs through the back of their helmets to control boards in their backpacks, which the two men lugged around to public appearances.

Kevin Furry, whose former company, LED Effects Inc., installed the electronics, said the initial sight of the contraptions "scared our receptionist." Fans called incessantly, he said, requesting duplicates, but he refused, putting a notice on the company's website to warn fans it wouldn't make replicas without Daft Punk's permission.

Fans got to work constructing their own, or enlisting independent craftsmen.

Harrison Krix, 30, was working at an ad agency in Atlanta when he decided to try his hand at re-creating a Daft Punk helmet for a prospective buyer in California four years ago.

After months of blueprinting, mold-making, sculpting and

sanding, Mr. Krix shipped his helmet to an automotive shop that specialized in chrome plating, installed circuit boards and eventually delivered a shimmering gold specimen nearly identical to the first one worn by Mr. de Homem-Christo, complete with rainbow LEDs.

His time-lapse YouTube video documenting the 749-step process, according to one fan's count, "How to Make a Daft Punk Helmet in 17 Months" has clocked more than three million views.

"I was just kind of winging it," says Mr. Krix, who received so many offers after fans got wind of his work that he quit his ad-agency job and went into prop-making full time.

Now, though, he says he just sells do-it-yourself kits instead of finished helmets since he got a "terrifying" email from a Daft Punk representative who was concerned that he was making it

sound in an eBay ad as if he were a member of the band. Daft Punk declined to comment for this article.

Hayes Johnson, 23, an assistant graphic designer at Johnson State College in Johnson, Vt., said his first attempt to make a replica out of a baseball helmet, red Christmas lights and soda cans while in high school was "really primitive."

Several years later, he fashioned a more respectable pair that fetched \$1,000 on eBay. Now, Mr. Johnson is in the process of updating a chart he published in 2010 entitled "A Visual History of Daft Punk Helmets," which diagrams the subtle evolution of helmets worn by the band.

"To the naked eye, it looks like Daft Punk helmets haven't changed in recent years. I feel really dorky when I talk about this stuff, but they are actually very different," said Mr. Johnson, noting shifts over time in

color and style.

Kevin Sanders, founder of the Daft Club, a London fan site, says he started seeing so much helmet-hawking in discussion forums that he created a special page where buyers and sellers could connect.

Mr. Sanders said his website has tracked a 365% jump in the number of members seeking helmets last month from the year earlier. Helmets without programmable light displays cost from \$200 to \$500; computerized designs run up to several thousand dollars.

"People are so desperate for these things that they are willing to wear everyday household buckets," says Mr. Sanders, adding that official Daft Punk merchandise is hard to find.

Helmet selection can be nerve-racking. Michael Wilson, a creative director at a tech company in Toronto, worries about having a "fairly big head" because he ex-

pects good-quality helmets run small, since serious fans are after a snug, sleek fit, not something "comically large."

Mr. Wilson, 32, thinks displaying the helmet in his home would be a "great icebreaker" to ignite discussion among guests.

Helmet-makers aren't necessarily hip to the band's music. Thomas Spragge, a 54-year-old prototype toy-maker in Massachusetts, had never heard of Daft Punk until three years ago when his daughter asked him to make a helmet.

Her headgear got such "an incredible response" that he decided to make 10 more to sell. The first one he posted on eBay received more than 60 bids and 3,000 views before selling last month to a fan in Texas for \$1,125—nearly three times what it cost him to produce.

As for the tunes, they are growing on him. "It's kind of like new disco," he says.