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Politics

Europe's voters revolt

(UPI) -- The anti-austerity revolt of European voters continued Sunday when electors in a key German province gave Chancellor Angela Merkel's Christian Democrats just 28 percent of the vote, the party's lowest percentage since 1948.

This is a grim time to be in office in Europe. Voters have turned out governments in Britain, Ireland, Portugal, Italy, Spain, France and Greece. And while Merkel remains in office at the national level and remains personally popular, her own coalition with Bavaria's Christian Social party is fraying badly.

How much of Sunday's vote was against the austerity that Merkel is forcing upon Europe and how much a reaction against the way Germany continues reluctantly to bail out the bankrupt European partners is an open question. Either way, it means voters are losing trust in Merkel's economic stewardship, even though Germany has recovered more strongly from the crisis than any other European economy.

All this took place as Greece slid further down the slope toward what the markets are calling "Grexit," a Greek exit from the euro, which many fear would trigger Europe's biggest crisis since World War II. After their chaotic elections and inability to form a coalition government, it isn't easy to see how Greece musters the political will to make the budget cuts and suffer the economic pain required to remain inside the euro.

But if Greece goes, it is also not easy to see how to prevent the contagion spreading to Portugal, Spain and even Italy as depositors take their euros from their own national banks and deposit them in safer German banks, rather than see savings eroded by devaluation.

The dirty secret here is that on close examination Germany's economic situation, despite its strong manufacturing sector and massive export trade, isn't nearly as strong as it looks.

Germany's Market Economy Foundation reports that in addition to the official national debt of roughly \$2.6 trillion, there are \$5.9 trillion in future benefit promises to retirees, the sick and people requiring nursing care. These are commitments that aren't documented in official budgets nor has any provision been made to finance them. When these commitments are included, Germany's real debt isn't the "official" 80 percent of gross domestic product but 276 percent.

Moreover, the disguised way in which Germany has continued to bail out the weaker Europeans is becoming a serious public issue. This is done through the "Target2" system of the European Central Bank, where the debits and credits of the various eurozone members are held.

There has been a sharp jump in the Bundesbank's Target2 claims within the European Central Bank's internal payment network from \$706 billion in February to \$795 billion in March. Bundesbank claims have risen six-fold since 2008. Bundesbank chief Jens Weidmann is demanding collateral from weaker states for Target2 transfers.

These German credits, equivalent to \$800 billion, are balanced by debts of Greek, Irish, Portuguese, Spanish and Italian central banks of almost \$850 billion. So long as the German central bank doesn't demand its money, it is in effect bankrolling the other European partners. And since this is done between central banks, there has been no parliamentary authorization for this hidden bailout.

"The euro-system is near explosion," said Professor Hans-Werner Sinn, head of Germany's IFO Institute, addressing Austria's Economics Academy on April 19. "This enormous international credit should have been subjected to the parliaments of Europe."

He may well be right. But the voters seem intent on throwing the parliaments of Europe into disarray or into coalitions that are either unworkable or impotent to take the decisive action required.

This might not be so alarming, were it not that even bigger political challenges lie in wait for Europe. Its social contract and generous welfare state is becoming steadily less sustainable as the society ages. More and more people are qualifying for pensions and expensive elderly healthcare while fewer and fewer young people are coming into the labor market and when they do there are few jobs for them. If things look grim for Europe's incumbent politician now, they will soon look even worse as they are forced to push through new laws raising the retirement age, curbing pension and welfare payments and raising taxes.

By MARTIN WALKER

International

US - TURKEY: FORGING STRONGER TIES



For the United States, Turkey has always been an important, if at times complicated, ally.



dogan; and the failure in the West to understand the dramatic changes in Turkey over the last decade.

By most indicators, Turkey today is more representative, modern and economically successful than when the AKP first came to power in late 2002.

Although it has pursued a more active foreign policy, Ankara's outreach to Syria, Libya and Iran began well before the AKP came to power – indeed, before the party even existed.

Turkey's evolution is not all good news, of course.

Washington and Ankara remain divided over the Arab-Israeli conflict.

And while Turkey's position toward Iran is evolving in a direction more consistent with that of the United States, between 2008 and 2010 the Turkish government pursued its interests there without regard for American policy.

Turkey's initial reluctance to host an early-warning anti-missile radar station on its territory aroused concern that it was distancing itself from NATO, but Ankara ultimately decided to honor its security commitment to its traditional allies.

There is also continuing friction over how to characterize the mass killings of Armenians in 1915, the division of Cyprus and Turkey's relationship with Hamas.

The Turkish government has its own views of these issues, and while Washington should help Turkey and Armenia improve their relations, support a resolution to the Cyprus conflict and seek an end to the estrangement between Turkey and Israel, these matters should not preclude the deepening of U.S.-Turkey relations.

On the domestic front, Turkey may be more democratic, but it is not yet a full-fledged democracy. Democratic change is a process that in any country will result in both steps forward and reversals.

Turkish leaders have at times manifested a majoritarian view of democracy, without due regard for minority and individual rights, making them appear no more liberal than their predecessors.

Turkey's detention of almost a hundred journalists is inconsistent with a country that aims to deepen its democratic practices.

There is, however, an opportunity for Washington to capitalize on its good relations with Ankara and to encourage Turkish leaders to follow through with their commitments to write a new, democratic constitution, seek a solution to the Kurdish problem, establish a formal and healthy balance in civil-military relations, and safeguard personal and political freedoms.

To make the vision for a new U.S.-Turkey partnership a reality, Ankara and

Washington should observe the following principles in their relationship: equality and mutual respect for each other's interests, confidentiality and trust, close and intensive consultations to identify common goals and strategies on issues of critical importance, avoidance of foreign policy surprises, and recognition and management of inevitable differences between them.

In the politically dynamic Middle East, Ankara and Washington can collaborate on development projects through the U.S. Agency for International Development and the Turkish International Cooperation Agency.

Working together, the United States and Turkey can help generate economic growth in places like Egypt, Tunisia and Libya.

To support this effort, Washington should extend financing, guarantees and political risk insurance to Turkish and American businesses that partner in seeking to invest in the Middle East.

For the United States, Turkey has always been an important, if at times complicated, ally.

Challenges in the bilateral relationship surely remain, but there is an opportunity for Washington and Ankara to forge a genuinely new partnership.

To do otherwise would be to miss an historic chance to set ties between the United States and Turkey on a cooperative trajectory in Europe, the Eastern Mediterranean, the Middle East and Africa for a generation.

By Madeleine K. Albright and Stephen J. Hadley

Society

MORE WOMEN ARE PAYING ALIMONY

(Reuters) - Tables have turned in U.S. divorce courts with more women paying their former husbands alimony and child support than ever before, according to U.S. lawyers.

As women climb higher up the career ladder and outpace their exes in salary, when love goes wrong and marriages break up they are being compelled to contribute to the livelihood of their former spouses.

And some are not happy about it.

More than half, 56 percent, of divorce lawyers across the United States have seen an increase in mothers paying child support in the last three years and 47 percent have noted a hike in the number of women paying alimony, according to the American



Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers.

"It shows that women have really moved up financially and that in many instances they are the major bread winners in a lot of families," said Alton Abramowitz, the president-elect of the academy.

"The glass ceiling has been pierced and more and

more women have taken over the financial responsibilities and have been saddled with them as well.

It is a fact of the way our society has evolved over the last number of years," Abramowitz, who has been practicing law for 39 years, described the findings of the survey and the changed role of women in the workforce as a sea change.

In his graduating law school class of 135, there were just six women.

Data from the Digest of Education Statistics show that the number of men and women receiving medical degrees in the U.S. is almost equal, unlike 1980 when only about a third of medical degrees were awarded to women. The number of women getting law degrees has nearly doubled.

"You are seeing the results of that, the impact, now in terms of the professions," Abramowitz said.

Although women have made strides professionally, the divorce rate in the United States has remained fairly constant.

About half of marriages in the United States end in divorce.

The rate has hovered between 46 and 53 percent for decades, he added.

Just as many men grumbled about paying alimony to their former wives, women are not pleased with the turnaround.

"We see women who are every bit as angry as their male counterparts, maybe more so, when they are confronted with the concept of paying spousal support to a man," said Abramowitz.

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