

'I won't pay' movement spreads across Greece

In light of austerity measures, citizens ignore tolls, transit ticket costs, even bills for healthcare



Thanassis Stavrakis / AP

A passenger passes a covered ticket machine with a plastic bag during a protest by PAME, a Communist Party-backed labor union, at the Syntagma Metro station in Athens.

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 Associated Press

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ATHENS, Greece— They blockade highway toll booths to give drivers free passage. They cover subway ticket machines with plastic bags so commuters can't pay. Even doctors

are joining in, preventing patients from paying fees at state hospitals.

Some call it civil disobedience. Others a freeloading spirit. Either way, Greece's "I Won't Pay" movement has sparked heated debate in a nation reeling from a debt crisis that's forced the government to take drastic austerity measures — including higher [taxes](#), wage and pension cuts, and price spikes in public services.

What started as a small pressure group of residents outside Athens angered by higher highway tolls has grown into a movement affecting ever more sectors of society — one that many say is being hijacked by left-wing parties keen to ride popular discontent.

A rash of political scandals in recent years, including a dubious land swap deal with a rich monastery and alleged bribes in state contracts — has fueled the rebellious mood.

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At dawn last Friday, about 100 bleary-eyed activists from a Communist Party-backed labor union covered ticket machines with plastic bags at Athens metro stations, preventing passengers from paying their fares, to protest public transport ticket price hikes.

Other activists have taped up ticket machines on buses and trams. And thousands of people simply don't bother validating their public transport tickets when they take the subway or the bus.

"The people have paid already through their taxes, so they should be able to travel for free," said Konstantinos Thimianos, 36, an activist standing at the metro picket line in central Syntagma Square.

In one of their frequent occupations of the toll booths on the northern outskirts of Athens recently, protesters wore brightly colored vests with "total disobedience" emblazoned across their backs, and chanted: "We won't pay for their crisis!"

The tactic has cropped up in the health sector, with some state hospital doctors staging a blockade in front of pay counters to prevent patients from paying their € flat fee for consultations.

Critics deride the protests as yet another example of a freeloading mentality that helped lead the country into its financial mess.

"The course from initial lawlessness to final wanton irresponsibility is like a spreading cancer," Dionysis Gousetis said in a recent column in the respected daily broadsheet Kathimerini.

"Now, with the crisis as an alibi ... the freeloaders don't hide. They appear publicly

and proudly and act like heroes of civil disobedience. Something like Rosa Parks or Mahatma Gandhi," Gousetis wrote. "They're not satisfied with not paying themselves. They are forcing others to follow them."

Many accuse left-wing parties and labor unions of usurping a grassroots movement with legitimate grievances for their own political ends.

"You think that lawlessness is something revolutionary, which helps the Greek people," Prime Minister George Papandreou said recently, lashing out in Parliament at Coalition of the Left party head Alexis Tsipras. "It is the lawlessness which we have in our country that the Greek people are paying for today."

But there is something about the "I Won't Pay" movement that speaks to something deeper within Greek society: a propensity to bend the rules, to rebel against authority, particularly that of the state.

It is so ingrained that many Greeks barely notice the myriad small, daily transgressions — the motorcycle driving on the sidewalk, the car running the red light, the blatant disregard

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of yet another government attempt to ban smoking in restaurants and bars.

Less innocuous is persistent and widespread tax avoidance despite increasingly desperate government measures.

"There is a general culture of lawlessness, starting from the most basic thing, tax evasion or tax avoidance, which is something that Greeks have been exercising since their state was created," said social commentator Nikos Dimou.

But many see the "I Won't Pay" movement as something much simpler: the people's refusal to pay for the mistakes of a series of governments accused of squandering the nation's future through corruption and cronyism.

"I don't think it's part of the Greek character. Greeks, when they see that the law is being applied in general, they will implement it too," said Nikos Louvros, the 55-year-old chain-smoking owner of an Athens bar that openly flouts the smoking ban.

"But when it isn't being applied to some, such as when there are ministers who have been stealing, ... Well, if the laws aren't implemented at the top, others won't implement them."

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