



READ IT ON THE WALLS

AS GREECE BRACES ITSELF FOR THE AFTERMATH OF A DESTINY-DEFINING ELECTION, THE WALLS OF ITS CAPITAL REFLECT THE ENDURING ANGER OF ITS CITIZENS

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For the past five years, Greece has teetered on a precipice, somewhere between the depths of fury and the possibility of hope. Now, in the throes of possible change, Athenians are navigating a new tumult: unnerving optimism in some quarters, exhausted cynicism in others; an existential questioning what comes next, a calculation of how to survive it.

But, more than anything, the country's very public humiliation on the global stage has left its populace angry. Many are quietly bitter, sucked dry by the austerity demanded in return for €240bn in aid, drained by the repeated blows of bad news.

Three million people live on, or below, the poverty line. Over a million have no access to healthcare. Half of all young people are unemployed. Gross domestic product is at Depression-era levels.

The residents of its ancient capital have watched the unravelling of their country through their windows, on their streets, and on their walls. They have had to find ways to express their frustration.

The portrait of a metropolis at tipping point is now sketched in spray paint and marker pen. Amid the grandeur of ancient monuments, its residents are demanding change, with little idea of how or when

it will come. The birthplace of democracy has been shouting, in spray paint.

The defacing of the old – the establishment – with visceral scrawl is no longer sacrilege but a desperate plea for change, an attempt to fight depression with defiance.

Inked additions to the urban cityscape are erased, then rewritten. It is a cycle of attempted renewal that will continue as long as the city's tumultuous debate with itself lasts.

On one downtown wall: "You will see a white wall when we see a white day."



A once midnight-blue Porsche roadster torched by vandals in Exarcheia, a costly material commentary on conspicuous wealth. Firebombed three nights prior, it is now filled with trash and plastic bags of used toilet paper. The man who feeds the cats on neighbouring Strefi Hill every night at 11 o'clock is unperturbed as he lays out his tins. "We watched it happen," he says, "and now they will take it away."



Around the corner from a Romanian violinist playing for small change, the marble facade of the Akademia Athenon, the Academy of Athens, has become a show of red-lettered defiance against the rise of the Far Right. It lays the blame for the murder of Pavlos Fyssas – a hip-hop artist stabbed in the heart in September 2013 by a member of neo-Nazi party Golden Dawn – squarely on the shoulders of a government that has watched the rise of the party, which garnered 9.4% of the vote in last year's European elections.



Fifty thousand took to the city's streets to protest Pavlos Fyssas's death. Anger gave way to hatred and violence. Months later, the corrugated iron barrier erected as part of a restoration attempt on Athens's monuments has itself been covered in spray paint. One restorer working behind the mesh shrugs: "It reflects the turmoil of those who live in the city and their protest against very serious issues. There have been times when I've removed messages I agree with. And once we remove it, there's nothing to stop them from doing it again."

There's an old Greek saying: "The children of the wise have cooked, before they're hungry." But outside the offices of Idryma Kinonikon Asfaliseon (the social security offices), an adage about prudence and foresight has been repurposed in a time of need: "The bad boys are already full, before they're hungry." A spray-painted accusation of corruption and selfishness, it is scrawled on the marble walls of the state fund dispensing social welfare, whose pension handouts have been slashed by an average of 40% from pre-crisis levels.

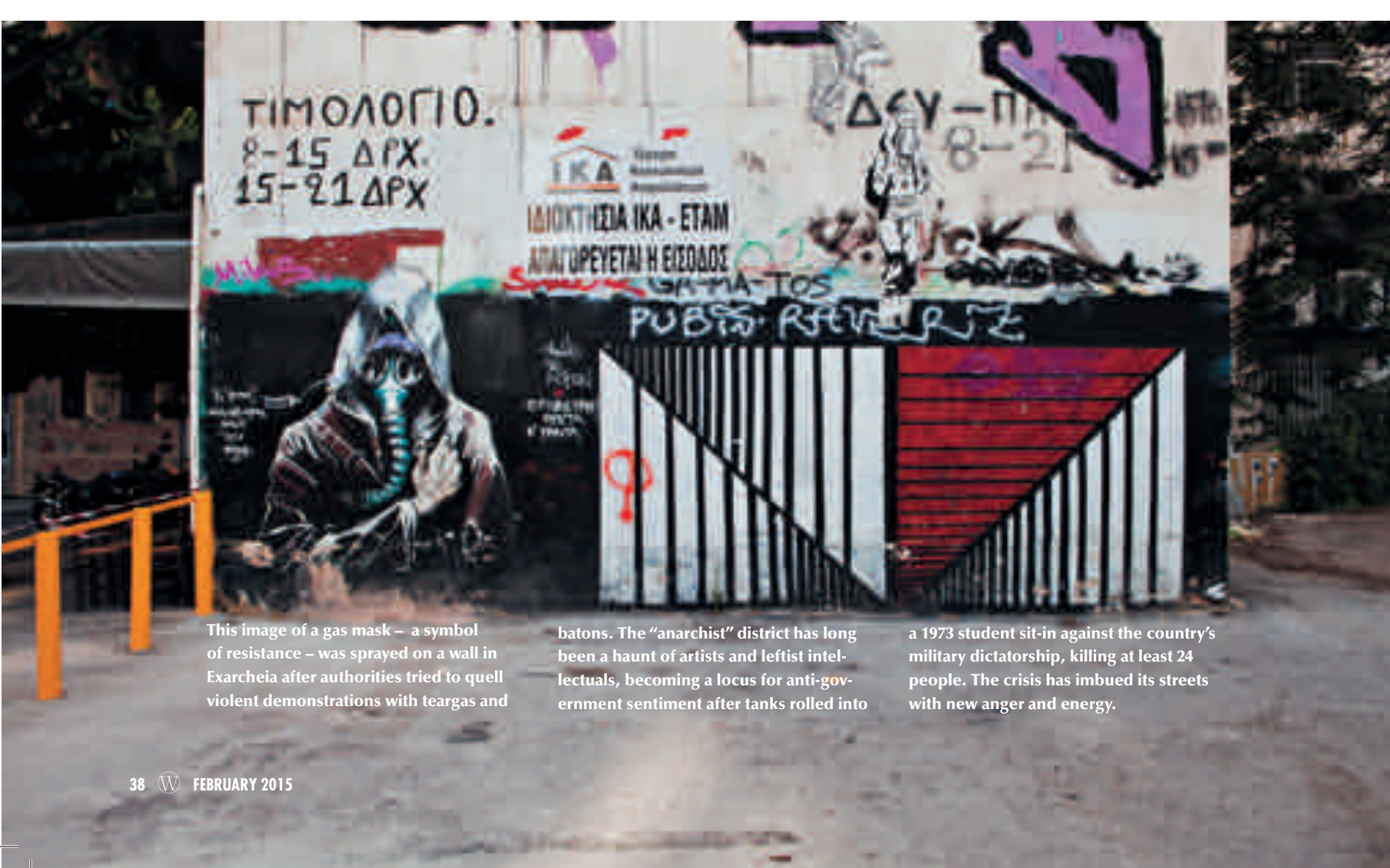




Outside the Cultural Centre on Solonos Street, Athena – goddess of wisdom and war, on whose name and principles of reason the city's foundations were built – is blindfolded with ink. For more than a year, her marble bust was no longer a witness to the businesses closing down across the road or the crowds being attacked with tear gas. She saw neither the unrest at the adjacent law faculty that shut down the school for months, nor the roses in her surrounding flowerbeds wilt and die. Her black veil has since been removed.



On the apricot walls of municipal offices in downtown Athens, graffiti has been whitewashed with paste. Painted over with chemicals that remove spray paint, the wall will be washed and treated, over and over. But even those tasked with removing the scrawl are angry. "We are at a point where we speak again of bread, education and freedom," says one restorer. "We are again at a time when we are deprived of basic goods, food, work and decent pay."



This image of a gas mask – a symbol of resistance – was sprayed on a wall in Exarcheia after authorities tried to quell violent demonstrations with teargas and

batons. The "anarchist" district has long been a haunt of artists and leftist intellectuals, becoming a locus for anti-government sentiment after tanks rolled into

a 1973 student sit-in against the country's military dictatorship, killing at least 24 people. The crisis has imbued its streets with new anger and energy.

On Tzavella Street in Exarcheia, a huge slice of cake for one wealthy fork, a tiny slice for the rest: stencilled commentary on how the elite have mostly escaped the crisis, with the hard-working multitudes having to pay off the past excesses of the powerful and corrupt. Austerity has been fiscally toughest on the middle class. Last year, self-employed professionals had to pay nine times more tax compared to pre-crisis levels.



At the height of the crisis in 2011, amid violent riots and the pinch of austerity, students from Athens's art school painted their prayer for their city 11 storeys high. An inverted interpretation of German painter Albrecht Dürer's 16th-Century pen-and-ink sketch, the palms rest on each other, upside down on the road to the sea and the port of Piraeus. They called it, "Praying for Us".

