

From Bunga-Bunga to Getting the Boot

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Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi has resigned. The Italian and European political left rightfully considered Berlusconi a symbol of the degradation of Italian politics and celebrated his departure.

But the problem is not with Berlusconi himself but with the majority of Italians who voted him into office. Russian voters are not responsible for the failures of their leaders because this country does not have true elections. But that cannot be said of Italy.

If Berlusconi is such a bad leader, why did the Italian people keep electing him? Who is ultimately to blame for this mess?

After the collapse of Benito Mussolini's regime, providing society a social safety net — something that served as one of the ideological bases that gave birth to Italian fascism — remained a central goal for every post-World War II government. This goal was embraced by both Italian communists, who received funding from the Soviet Union, as well as Christian Democrats funded by the CIA.

As the social welfare system got larger with every passing year to satisfy the growing

appetites of voters and labor unions, the government also devalued the lira to maintain the competitiveness of domestic industries on global markets.

When Italy joined the euro zone, however, attempts were made to introduce some level of fiscal discipline. Italy's introduction of the euro meant that the country was effectively placed under Germany's financial management. These measures were a big blow to Italy's large businesses, which suffered in terms of its global competitiveness.

Italy's economy is crippled further by the mafia in the south and trade unions in the north.

Nonetheless, Italy's economy is still the seventh largest in the world. But this is largely because of the success of small, mostly family-run businesses with less than 300 employees. Managers and workers from this sector were the first to vote for Berlusconi.

Berlusconi is a self-made multi-billionaire. His success story is more typical of someone from the United States than from Italy.

Before Berlusconi entered the media business, Italian television was state-controlled and boring. Private television channels were not allowed to broadcast nationally. Berlusconi got around the ban by building a network of regional companies and was the first to give Italians entertaining, high-quality television programming.

When the government caught on to what Berlusconi was doing, it simply turned off his broadcast signal. Voters were so angry that they almost revolted, and Berlusconi realized that in Italy, it is impossible to be rich and not play a role in politics.

When Berlusconi first arrived on the political scene, he attempted to implement pension reforms to pull Italy out of its financial hole. That move cost him his office, and he spent the next seven years with the opposition.

After that, Berlusconi had no more illusions. He realized that a politician in a welfare state can do only one thing: promise the masses exactly what they want.

It turned out that Italians could endure Berlusconi's "bunga-bunga" parties and his friendship with Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and former Libyan leader Moammar Gadhafi. But the three things that they definitely could not tolerate were austerity measures, social reforms or any real attempt to restructure the ailing Italian economy. So the aging Don Juan became even more populist and did everything he could to please the people.

But the problem in Italy is not Berlusconi. The problem in Italy is universal suffrage combined with an aging population accustomed to entitlements.

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