



# SIMON KUPER

OPENING SHOT

## The forever crisis: a Greek tragedy

One recent balmy evening, a Greek friend took me around Athens on the back of his motorbike. We whizzed through traffic that has thinned during Greece's eight-years-and-counting Great Depression. Here was the rare European city centre without gentrification: the local lower-middle-class has made way not for hipsters but for migrants from Syria and Pakistan. They don't want to be here, but got stuck heading west.

Outside parliament, a few dozen people were waving Greek flags, protesting against something. But such scenes have become rare: most Greeks have given up. "For me now, there is not a crisis," shouted my friend from under his helmet. "This is how we live. And we're learning to live with our fears." Athenians have adjusted to a forever crisis.

The tipping point from anger to acceptance came exactly two years ago. The EU and other foreign lenders had kept pushing massively indebted Greece to slash spending. Syriza, the far-left ruling party, put the issue to a referendum. Egged on by Syriza, Greeks voted "No". Most presumably thought Syriza would shoo the lenders away. Instead, within a week Syriza U-turned, essentially agreeing to follow the lenders' orders. Most Greeks got the message: there was no alternative, no way out. "Now people don't have hope. It's a kind of bad adaptation to the situation," says Giannis Kallinikakis, one of the psychologists I spoke to at the Athens Solidarity Center, a civil-society hub that helps migrants and poor Greeks.

**'Greece is (in part) the victim of a foreign conspiracy. It is the eurozone's body in the cupboard, sacrificed to save the euro'**

Many older Greeks in particular understand the crisis through conspiracy theories. One man explained to me that the government, in league with German and Israeli "business lobbies", had created the crisis to fill its pockets. I wanted to shout, "Rubbish!" but, in fact, he just had the wrong conspiracy theory. Greece is (in part) the victim of a foreign conspiracy. The eurozone countries didn't want to decimate Greece, but they did want to keep it in the euro while cutting Greek spending, and the consequence was economic decimation. Greece is the eurozone's body in the cupboard, sacrificed to save the euro.

But many younger Athenians - who tend to be better educated - blame the crisis on older Greeks: the participants in the pre-2009 system of communal state looting. Younger people's lives have stalled. Few can marry, buy a home or have kids: the average Greek woman has just 1.3 children. Even an evening out is now beyond most people. If

Athens feels placid, it's partly thanks to the internet: Greeks can now entertain themselves at home forever almost for free.

This generation will never achieve the Greek dream of a pension, coffees and sun from age 60. They may never even retire. The official minimum wage is about €300 a month, but there are illicit ways of paying people less, to work the longest hours in Europe. Athenian workers - lunching on bread and cheese at their desks - have no certainties. My motorcycling friend, who is a head of department, says that every morning his colleagues scan his face to judge his mood. If he calls someone into his office, the person visibly freezes: will he be sacked, or asked to take another pay cut? Average Greek wages dropped 10 per cent from 2007 through 2015, worse than any other advanced country except Britain.

My friend's own salary has halved in 10 years. He wishes he had emigrated, and hopes his toddler daughter will do so one day. "Everyone around my age, 30, has a dream of leaving," Zachou Lena, another psychologist, told me. Many have left: Greece's brain drain will outlast even the crisis.

Yet most people are saved by the Greek family - the eternal safety net in a nation with a weak state. A growing number of Athenians now live with their parents into their forties. Others move into the family home in the soporific but cheap ancestral village. Traditionally, older Greeks supported the young, but that's changing. One office worker told me he sometimes helps out his parents, whose joint pension has been cut from about €2,800 a month to €1,800. A jobless relative might be supported for years. The psychologists say these mechanisms could be infantilising: "People develop addictive relationships, they act like spoiled children, they consume too much: iPhones, cars." But crisis-hit Athens would be unlivable without the Greek family. Those who don't have one can easily end up picking through rubbish bins.

Of course, some Greeks are doing just fine. My motorcycle friend and I ended the evening dining in a packed rooftop taverna in a middle-class suburb. The richest Athenians have had "a nice crisis", says Paris Mantzavras of brokerage Pantelakis Securities. They just take care not to flash their cash like before. Alexander Kitroeff, historian of Greece at Haverford College in the US, sees the country becoming almost central American: the once solid lower-middle-class of retirees, lower civil servants and small shopkeepers is disappearing, leaving only rich and poor. Ten years ago, Greece imagined it had become northern Italy, but it has since discovered it's more like Bulgaria. Try shedding your fantasies to accept that. 

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