

Document

The Way Greeks Live Now

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In a little brick-walled taverna in Athens, over a lunch of Cretan salad and stuffed grape leaves, a Greek journalist named Aris Hadjigeorgiou was holding forth one day in late November about the calamitous state of his city and country as only a veteran metropolitan reporter could. He explicated the insidious ways in which the upper echelons of Greek media were intertwined with the political structure, which prevented reporting of financial mismanagement and also clouded any hope for resolving the crisis. And he noted little things, like the leaflets on car windshields advertising moving companies: literal signs of the way the economic crisis was affecting Athens, as people angled for escape routes, either abroad or to the countryside. And how the mayor's office was at that moment considering a quaint but cockeyed approach for the season's Christmas lighting scheme: stringing lights around the city's hundreds of shuttered storefronts.

At some point, I asked Hadjigeorgiou how the crisis was affecting him personally. Life was getting difficult, he acknowledged. Then, prodded a bit more, he mentioned that he had not been paid by his newspaper, the major left-leaning daily, in four months. Nor had any of his colleagues at the paper. Yet despite the lack of paychecks, few if any employees had left the paper (which has since filed for bankruptcy), for the good reason that there was nowhere else to go.

Which pretty much sums up Greece. Everyone talks incessantly about the economy — about Merkel and Sarkozy and the E.U., about the tightly knit elite that has run Greece for so long and about their neighbors' troubles and their own — but somehow everyday life rumbles on, in a collective trance, shot through with gallows humor.

By many indicators, Greece is devolving into something unprecedented in modern Western experience. A quarter of all Greek companies have gone out of business since 2009, and half of all small businesses in the country say they are unable to meet payroll. The suicide rate increased by 40 percent in the first half of 2011. A barter economy has sprung up, as people try to work around a broken financial system. Nearly half the population under 25 is unemployed. Last September, organizers of a government-sponsored seminar on emigrating to Australia, an event that drew 42 people a year earlier, were overwhelmed when 12,000 people signed up. Greek bankers told me that people had taken about one-third of their money out of their accounts; many, it seems, were keeping what savings they had under their beds or buried in their backyards. One banker, part of whose job these days is persuading people to keep their money in the bank, said to me, "Who would trust a Greek bank?"

The situation at the macro level is, if anything, even more transformational. The Chinese have largely taken over Piraeus, Greece's main port, with an eye to make it a conduit for shipping goods into Europe. Qatar is looking to invest \$5 billion in various projects in Greece, including tourism infrastructure. Other, relatively flush Europeans are trying to make "Greece the Florida of Europe," Theodore Pelagidis, a Greek economist at the University of Piraeus, told me, referring in particular to plans to turn islands into expensive retirement homes for wealthy people from other parts of the continent. Whether or not the country pays its debts, he went on, other nations and foreign

companies “now understand the Greek government is powerless, so in the future they will take over viable assets and run parts of the country by themselves.”

For months, Greece has sat at the epicenter of an economic crisis that is threatening the foundations of Europe and that has the potential to bring new waves of economic upset to America. The latest austerity plan meant to satisfy Greece's creditors and allow for new infusions of financial aid may have averted involuntary default — and a global economic downturn — but will nonetheless make life for ordinary Greeks even more difficult. The plan reduces the minimum wage by more than 20 percent, mandates thousands of layoffs and reduces some pensions, probably ensuring that strikes and demonstrations will continue to be a feature of the Greek landscape.

Yet spending time in Greece presents a complicated picture of what is going on. There is certainly anger and belt-tightening and dark clouds of depression. It's not uncommon to see decently dressed Greeks discreetly rummaging through garbage bins for food. A new book about how the country survived the Nazi occupation — “Starvation Recipes” — has become a surprise hit. But there are also success stories that fly fully in the face of the turmoil. Most surprising, there is a pervasive sense of relief over the crisis that is upon them, as if a long, strange dream is at last over.

My first impression of Petros Vafiadis was of a bear. He's a big, jowly man, and he sat hunkered by the grille of his living-room fireplace. People in his town in northern Greece — Giannitsa — told me that the rising price of heating oil forced residents to rely on their fireplaces, and for the first time in memory, you regularly smell wood smoke in the chilly air.

Vafiadis is 56 and has spent his life in construction. For the last 10 years, he has been a site supervisor for a company called Archi-Tek, overseeing the building of big, mostly government-sponsored projects like schools and museums. At its height, the company had 50 people on staff and employed about 900 contract workers. Today it has two employees: engineers who are basically putting finishing touches on completed projects. All work in the Thessaly region, where the company is based, has dried up. Vafiadis was laid off in September, two years short of retirement. He took a drag on his cigarette and said, in a mud-thick smoker's voice, “There's no brightening in the future.” He was referring to both the Greek situation and his own. “I think things will only get worse.”

His wife, Ekaterina, set a homemade cheese-and-leek pie on the table, then took a seat. The room had peach-colored walls and a white-tiled floor; one wall was covered with religious icons; a glass swan sat like a sentinel on top of the Sony flat-screen TV. “There are families worse off than us,” Ekaterina reminded her husband. “There are lots of families where nobody is working.” She still had her job — as a cook at a kindergarten cafeteria — though her salary was cut from \$1,730 a month to \$1,260. The couple's income has dropped from \$43,000 a year to about half that, and it will drop another \$530 a month once Vafiadis's 12 months of unemployment benefits run out.

They have no savings, they told me, because when they bought their home in 2000, they used their life savings as a down payment. Plus they have two sons in their early 20s, both of whom they put through college. One son, Traianos, who studied electrical engineering, sat with us as we talked, and when the subject of fallback financial reserves came up, there was a sudden flurry of back-and-forth banter in Greek, tinged with tension and dark laughter. Eventually Traianos explained to me that his father's sister died some years ago and left her savings to her two nephews: Traianos and his brother. “So now our children can start giving to us, for a change,” Petros Vafiadis said with a laugh. To which his son replied, with an edgy chuckle, “If things get harder, then we'll give.”

The austerity measures imposed by the government as it tries to appease distant bankers and governments have caused hardships for ordinary people (to save money, residents of Giannitsa have taken to driving across the border into Bulgaria for everything from dentist visits to gas), but when I met with him some months before the February austerity agreement, Vafiadis said: “Still I think this is the only way out of the crisis. The government has to impose cuts in salaries and pensions.”

Anastasia Tsangarli, a family friend who showed up to take part in our discussion, agreed that cuts were necessary, saying, “The Greek way of life is to spend and then overspend.” She and her husband are also from Giannitsa but lived for a long time in Jersey City, where she worked in a factory making fake fur coats. When the factory closed, they moved back, only to find life far more difficult than it used to be. Her husband, an electrician, is out of work. She does some baby-sitting. “We are afraid of the future, so we don’t spend anything without having a good reason,” she said. But the couple have an escape plan. They became American citizens while living in the United States. Her husband is 60. When he is 62, they can return so he can claim Social Security benefits.

As the economy implodes, young people are leaving Giannitsa. Traianos Vafiadis, who is 24, told me that of the group of six friends he has had since childhood, he is the only one with a job, and the others have all emigrated or are looking for work abroad. I heard over and over from young Greeks that they are painfully aware of repeating the cycle that most recently occurred in the late 1940s, when a great diaspora of young Greeks left the country for work. The crucial difference is that now well-educated young people — future doctors, teachers and engineers — are leaving, suggesting that what is taking place is the hollowing-out not only of an economy but also of a whole social system.

The loss of young people worsens another problem facing this country: the birthrate is among the lowest in the world — and was even before the crisis manifested itself — making it unable to maintain population levels. This fact is much on the minds of ordinary Greeks. “And now it’s even worse,” Petros Vafiadis said. “Young couples aren’t having children because of the crisis.” He paused, then added, with a comic’s timing, “Maybe I’ll get a second wife and work on this demographic problem.” His wife gave out a high-pitched cackle, then shot back: “If he’s serious, someone should save the women of Greece.” As the laughter died down, I asked Petros the question that seemed most pressing. What was his plan? What, given the sorry state of affairs, was he going to do?

Things went quiet. The bearish man executed an elaborate movement of his upper body that, when it was over, I decided you would have to call a shrug. It was painful to watch. Earlier, when I talked to his son alone, he summarized his father’s situation: he was in his late 50s, spoke only Greek and knew only the kind of work he had done — work that won’t be coming back anytime soon. The shoulder twist was the only possible answer.

“Watch it! Watch out!” Paul Evmorfidis was driving up to a toll plaza on the main road from Athens to Thebes. He slowed down as he came to the toll arm blocking the road, but he was not paying the toll and, to my alarm, was not stopping. “I’m showing you something,” he said. He reached out his window, shoved the toll arm up out of the way and drove off as an alarm shrieked behind us. “This is what we do here — everybody who lives around here.” As the Greek government adds new taxes and surcharges onto its citizens, they respond with protest or evasion. After the government announced that there would be an additional 2010 income tax — in effect, retaxing that year’s income — people refused to pay, whereupon the government tacked a new property tax onto electricity bills, which you could elude only at the cost of having the power cut. Likewise, the toll plaza was installed to raise money. The toll was about \$3. “The problem is if you

live around here, you have to go down this road maybe five times a day,” Evmorfidis said. “Crazy! What kind of planning is that? So we protest.”

Evmorfidis could pay the toll painlessly. He and his brother are owners of a company called Coco-Mat, which specializes in all-natural bedding and furniture (“Sleep on nature,” the ads say). Coco-Mat supplies hotels around Europe with high-end mattresses, filled with layers of natural rubber, coco fiber and seaweed, and has 70 stores in 11 countries. Since last year, the company’s affiliate in China has been opening shops at the rate of one per month. A Coco-Mat outlet inside the ABC Furniture building in Lower Manhattan opened in 2010, and the brothers plan to open 10 stores in the United States in the next two years. Global sales for 2011 were \$70 million, 15 percent higher than the year before. Coco-Mat stores exude an airy, casual-chic vibe that seems the diametrical opposite of “economic crisis.” There is generally a kitchen area and a long sleek picnic table. If it’s around lunchtime, there might be a big bowl of Greek salad on the table. Customers are offered a glass of freshly squeezed orange juice or an espresso.

Coco-Mat is a Greek company, one that defies the crisis in the country both in its efforts (of the 30 Coco-Mat stores in Greece, five opened in the past year, in the very teeth of the crisis) and in its formula for success. If Petros Vafiadis and his family represent a common situation in Greece today — people who toiled diligently in the old system, only to find that its collapse necessitates their own — Paul Evmorfidis is atypical but also revealing of another path, one not generally taken but apparently not entirely overgrown. As we drove through a landscape of silvery-green olive trees set against gray-white hills, I wanted to know how this very successful Greek businessman thought Greece had fallen to such a state.

“This is a country with 300 days of sunshine per year,” he began, proceeding into a rambling, fast-paced discourse, the central point of which was that in buying into the euro, Greece tried foolishly to mimic other countries and in so doing shifted away from its natural advantages and way of life. “Working in offices is good in countries where there is lots of rain,” he said. “Greeks don’t need to be in offices. Athens has doubled in size in a couple of decades — it’s now half the population of the country! Two-hour traffic jams, man! After we joined the euro, the mentality totally changed. Suddenly it was like if you still live in the small village where you were born, you must be retarded. So Greeks left their islands and their villages and moved to the city, and they became maniacs. They started expecting loans and handouts.”

The modern Greek mentality, according to Evmorfidis, is a hyped-up version of the debt-ridden American consumerism of recent memory. “Greek people would take out a loan to buy a luxury car so they could say, ‘I have money,’ ” he said. “Crazy! I would run into someone I used to know, and suddenly he’s talking to me about the stock exchange. I say: ‘Come on, man! What do you know about the stock exchange? Let’s talk about apples and olives!’ ”

Evmorfidis is a high-energy man (a few weeks later he and his son executed a winter crossing of the Alps on bicycles), and as the speedometer hit 90 miles an hour, my foot was involuntarily pushing the nonexistent brake on the passenger’s side. “But you know what?” he added. “This crisis is exactly what we need. Merkel and Sarkozy are good for our health. I hope they don’t give us a penny!”

The standard short answer to how Greece got into its financial mess is that it borrowed too much and spent unwisely. Beneath this, people like to look for a cultural root. Most popular (outside Greece) is the north-south explanation, which holds that Northern Europeans are efficient and hardworking, and Southerners, while they may have better food and better sex lives, like to relax too much to run an efficient economy. But numbers don’t necessarily bear this out. Even the guy

selling you souvlaki in Athens can quote statistics from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development showing that the average Greek worked 2,116 hours in 2008, while the average German worked 1,426 hours. Traveling around the Greek countryside provides lots of anecdotal support to the notion that people do in fact work, and work hard.

Still, there's some value in looking at geography. Greece is part of Europe — you might say the heart of Europe (the euro symbol itself was designed after the Greek letter epsilon: a nod to the classical roots of modern Europe) — but in another sense, Greece is a remnant of the Ottoman Empire, that realm famous for top-down rule, bribery and looking the other way. Everyone I talked to seemed to feel that this interconnected triad of features is indeed elemental and thus part of the reason for the crisis. People on the left and people on the right agree that its bureaucracy is a menace. *Fakelaki* (literally “little envelopes”) are a legendary feature of society. If you're starting a business, there are lots of signatures you need, and handing over the cash-stuffed envelopes has traditionally been part of the process.

Then, too, the intense international focus on the country's problems may be obscuring the fact that since it became part of the eurozone, Greece has actually made significant steps toward integrating with Europe. Mike Evmorfidis, Paul Evmorfidis's brother and co-owner of Coco-Mat, made this point to me. “When we started 20 years ago, it took six months to get through the bureaucracy,” he said. “And *fakelaki* were a part of that. But that has changed. Among the younger generation now, I would say that it does not exist at all, the business of the little envelopes. Young Greeks are really a part of Europe.”

The Evmorfidis brothers' story gives some perspective on the changes in Greece in the past 50 years or so. They were born in a small town near Sparta. In the 1950s, their father left home as part of the migration of Greeks who went abroad seeking work. He found a job in Stuttgart, Germany, working on the American military base, and was able to visit his family only once a year. Paul, who is 53, acted as surrogate father to his younger brother. Both did well in school, and both went on to do graduate studies in a way that reflected the country's dawning awareness of its place within Europe. Paul studied business in Athens and earned a master's degree in Germany, and Mike earned a Ph.D. in law at the Sorbonne in Paris.

Then, in 1989, while Paul was working in a jewelry shop in Plaka — Athens's tourist zone — a Dutch businessman asked if he knew of a Greek company that made mattresses. The Dutchman owned a bed shop and wanted to find a cheaper source. Paul took him to a Greek mattress company but saw at once that its quality was low. Whereupon he had an idea: do it right and ride what was then a growing wave of interest in all-natural products. The company emphasizes its use of Greek materials: wool from Thrace, cotton from Larissa, wood from Mount Athos, seaweed from Sparta.

Sparta, land of legendary warriors famed for their austerity and discipline, figures heavily in Paul Evmorfidis's thinking. When I asked if there was one element of Coco-Mat's strategy that he would like to see other Greek companies emulate, he said: “Spartan thinking, man! We've got to get lean and smart. All of these state subsidies that Greeks got, they make you fat and lazy.” I tried to point out the apparent contradiction of a company that sells ultracomfy beds insisting that Spartan thinking is its underlying philosophy, but he seemed not to notice. His brother echoed him in saying that a basic part of their strategy involved a determination to avoid bank loans: “We have grown step by step. We didn't want to invest more than we had gained. Our gains were not transformed into yachts or villas but were put back into the business.”

As for the future of the country, the Evmorfidis brothers profess a strange-sounding hopefulness, and their recent store openings in Greece would seem to indicate that it's not just talk. “I'm

naturally optimistic,” Mike said. “This is a cycle; things will come back. Plus it’s smart business to expand now. There are always opportunities in crisis.”

Those opportunities come at a cost to someone. Before the crisis, he said, the owner of a space in central Athens that they had their eyes on wanted \$20,000 a month in rent; when they opened a store there in December, it was for a monthly rent of \$7,000. Likewise, where Coco-Mat used to pay \$1,700 per cubic meter of Greek oak, the price has dropped to \$640. Coco-Mat’s furniture has also gone down in price inside Greece, Mike said, though not by as much. He told me that last year the company’s domestic sales were down 15 percent, a figure that he was quite upbeat about (“Not catastrophic!”) given the overall state of the economy. And when you consider that a Coco-Mat bed costs anywhere from \$3,300 to \$16,600, the fact that Greeks are still buying them gives some corrective to the image of an entire country in a state of free fall.

Then again, you could also look at this as evidence of a lingering state of denial. Or the sales of deluxe beds could be a sign of a two-tiered society that the economist Theodore Pelagidis sees developing in his country. “You are going to see a part of the population, the middle class, comprising say 30 to 50 percent, involved in some kind of resurgence,” he told me. “But another part of the population will be living on 300 or 400 euros (\$400 to \$500) a month. This part of Greek society won’t be living a Western European lifestyle. It will be more like Bulgaria.” Mike Evmorfidis admitted that where Coco-Mat’s Greek customers used to be a cross section of the economic spectrum, now it’s mostly the rich who buy his beds.

To the north of the Gulf of Corinth, Mount Helicon slopes down into a broad valley that, in classical times, was the location of a sanctuary devoted to the worship of the nine muses. I stepped out of a car into the cold wind sweeping up the valley and began hiking through an area crosshatched with vineyards. With me was a 27-year-old man named Stelios Zacharias, who talked about soil and slope and summer sun and the varietal finickiness of grapes.

When Zacharias and his brothers were children, their father, Athanasios, grew grapes here and sold the juice to neighbors, but he talked of starting a proper winery. Stelios studied business, and his older brother, Nicos, studied winemaking. Today they and their father run Muses Estate, which produced 200,000 bottles last year: merlot, cabernet sauvignon, chardonnay, as well as a Greek variety called *mouhtaro*.

We sampled each of these once we reached the winery, while a burning log snapped on the hearth and Ioanna Zacharias, Stelios’s mother, laid out platters of food. The Zacharias family’s business straddles the line between corporate-cosmopolitan and Greek-traditional. Stelios has pursued a strategy that involves combating the bad reputation of Greek wine not by producing something chic but by stressing value: the wines are soundly made and no bottle costs more than \$30 retail. The strategy is working, and with curious timing. Over the very years in which the economic crisis has arisen and engulfed the country, the little winery has taken off. The wines are distributed in four countries, including the United States, and deals are in place with eight more. Stelios Zacharias told me sales have doubled in each of the last five years — and 80 percent of sales are still within their economically crippled home country.

At the same time, the business remains steadfast to its village — the place where Stelios and his brother grew up, went to school and played soccer in the field down the street from the winery. In the fall, cousins and villagers participate in the grape harvest. A neighbor, who raises chickens, strolls across the road every couple of days with a dozen eggs, which he trades for a bottle of the house white. Stelios took me to the local olive-oil cooperative, something that many Greek villages still maintain, where his parents bring olives from their own trees. It was a simple husk of a building

housing a noisy press. The processing is free; the co-op keeps 2 percent of the oil, which it sells in order to stay in business. The little gleaming green, black and brown olives filled up a large metal tray waiting to be mashed. A stout man with a vast gray mustache turned the spigot and gave me a taste of the end result.

Zacharias says the troubles have rallied like-minded Greek businesspeople. “The crisis gives us the opportunity to clean the market of everyone who was trying to make something out of nothing. Then we can focus on what works: creating a real product, using real methods.”

A lot of people seem to be coming around to Zacharias’s way of thinking. According to the Greek farmers’ union, between 2008 and 2010 — even before the crisis reached its height — 38,000 people lost or gave up their jobs, as their dream of euro-capitalism died, and returned to the land, often to their home villages on the islands. Former accountants and Web designers are growing potatoes on Naxos, collecting resin from mastic trees on Chios and tending wheat fields on Crete. On the cloud-rimmed top of Mount Othrys, in the region of Magnesia, Ioannis Tsokaras, who a year ago quit the civil-service job in Athens from which he had endured one too many pay cuts, showed me what he is now, at 58, staking his hopes on: little yellow-green clumps of an herb called *sideritis*, or “mountain tea.” He was intent on turning what had been a sideline — cultivating wild herbs on land his family owned — into a living. His storage space, perched halfway down the mountain, was crammed with large, aromatic, light-as-air boxes of his product, awaiting shipment to markets in Athens. “This is a real business now,” he declared.

Such individual stories are signs of hope in a country that is searching for a viable future. Yet no matter how many families find their way back to the land, what ultimately happens to Greece depends more on what happens in the wider world.

One of the grandest piles of ancient stones in a country full of glorious ruins lies on the island of Crete. It is called Knossos, and it was to Greece what Greece is to Europe: the cradle of its civilization. At the core of its prehistory is the legend of King Minos, who ruled over the Greek islands. Minos maintained his hegemony over Greece by requiring that Athens, the second power in the Aegean world, send him tribute in the form of young men and women, whom Minos fed to the beast he kept in his labyrinth: the Minotaur.

Improbably enough, a Greek economist named Yanis Varoufakis has been drawing attention in many of the hot spots of global finance lately, offering the Minotaur myth as a metaphor for understanding recent macroeconomic events. As Varoufakis writes in his recent book, “The Global Minotaur,” the world in which we have been living until recently functioned thanks to the voracious consumption of a different kind of beast. After World War II, the U.S. built up the infrastructure of its European allies as well as its former enemies, all of whom became trading partners. The U.S., with its great industrial and financial might, became the world’s surplus nation: its profits flowed out to its allies in the form of aid and investments. By the early 1970s, however, other countries had robust economies, and the U.S. was a debtor nation. “At that moment, certain very bright men within the American financial hierarchy made a stunning realization,” Varoufakis told me. The realization was that it didn’t matter if the U.S. was the biggest surplus or biggest debtor nation. What mattered was controlling the world’s primary currency, which would allow the United States to continue to recycle the global economic surplus. The idea was not unlike the thinking behind a casino — whichever gamblers are winning or losing, the house, which sets the terms and takes its cut, always wins.

So a new system came into being, in which a huge part of the world’s capital flows went to service debt originating in the United States. American debt, and the need to feed it, would be the modern

Minotaur. The Wall Street financial houses became the handmaidens of the Minotaur. “The massive flow of capital into Wall Street gave it the impetus for financialization,” Varoufakis said, referring to the creation of derivatives and other risky financial vehicles. “And so Wall Street created a great deal of private money, with which it flooded the world and created huge bubbles, in the U.S. housing market and elsewhere.”

When that system came crashing down in 2008, Varoufakis says, “it was then only a matter of time that the euro would come into crisis.” Europe’s powerhouse economies — essentially, the northern countries — no longer had a place to sell their goods.

And where, in this grand picture, does Greece fit? Part of the logic of the eurozone involved the strong economies’ providing loans to the weaker ones, in order to build up their infrastructure so they could then buy products from the stronger countries — a kind of replay of what the U.S. did vis-à-vis Europe with the Marshall Plan. But while Greece took the loans, it didn’t invest wisely, and its own debt kept mounting.

As the weakest link in the eurozone, Greece gives us the clearest picture of what the larger economic downturn portends. And for all the hopefulness of some of the Greeks I met in my travels, others take a dimmer view of their future. Near Thessaloniki — Greece’s second-largest city — I visited a family home. Husband, wife and son were present. The woman is one of the top bankers in Greece. She spoke on condition that I not use her name or the name of her bank. When I asked for her views on the future, she said: “Last week, in the town of Larissa, I was sitting at an outdoor cafe, and a clean, well-dressed Greek man of about 60 passed by and politely asked if he could have the biscuit that came with my coffee. What you say about successful companies is good to hear. But the reality is that man who asked for my biscuit. You can’t see the crisis results fully yet because people have been living off their savings. Soon the savings will end. I believe that by the end of 2012, you will see a different Greece, a different country, with real poverty.”

According to Yanis Varoufakis, the future — for Greece and for much of the rest of the Western world, never mind recent upticks in the U.S. economy — is one of even more upheaval. “The Minotaur died, and that is what held everything together,” he said. “Until a new system is invented, we are in for turmoil.” As anecdotal evidence of the situation in Greece, he told me that all of his top Ph.D. students at the University of Athens were seeking jobs abroad. Then he added that he, too, would soon be leaving, possibly for a position in the United States.

Like many Greeks I talked to, Stelios Zacharias, the winemaker, insisted that as hard as it is, the crisis takes on a different character when put in local perspective. “For one thing, there isn’t a housing crisis,” he said. Economists echo this point: you don’t see homelessness in Athens the way you do in other hard-hit cities. That is because even as they were pursuing careers in Athens as stockbrokers or investment bankers, people maintained their ties to their villages. Astoundingly, about 80 percent of Greeks own a home. It may be on family land on a distant island, but it is still a home. Zacharias, for example, lives on land that his grandfather bought decades ago with coupons from a newspaper promotion. Many of those who have lost jobs in the city therefore have rural homes to retreat to, though whether there is income once they get there is another matter.

Family and community ties are certainly helping to hold Greece together thus far. When I asked the journalist Aris Hadjigeorgiou, two months after our meeting in the taverna, if he was getting a paycheck yet, he said the newspaper had completely stopped publication. “As a journalist, I don’t know if I’ll make it,” he said. But, he said, he was scraping by with the help of others. And he negotiated a lower rent with his landlady.

So maybe Paul Evmorfidis's argument has some validity: Greece's traditional infrastructure may not be the ultimate answer to its problems, given the global scale of things, but it may make difficult times less painful. The destination of my car trip with Evmorfidis was Volos, a vigorous port city in Thessaly and conduit for trade with Asia, where he had been asked to speak about the crisis to a group of business leaders. After the talk, as we walked out of the building, he was in the middle of telling me that what will save Greece is its still-vibrant sense of community when we saw a middle-aged woman coming down the steps. It was late, and we hadn't eaten dinner. He asked the woman if she knew where we could get something to eat. "Come to my home, and I'll cook for you," she said. And so we did.

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