

The Marks of Austerity in Thessaloniki, Greece

PHOTO ESSAY BY VINCENT BERTHE

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COMMERCE

In Greece, the combined effects of the financial crisis and the budgetary cuts purported to mend it have been swift and devastating. Since 2008, the unemployment rate has increased over 200%. About 50% of youths under 25 are unemployed – compared to 7% in Germany. More than a million people have been laid off in the last 6 years, and the number of Greeks suffering from depression has increased 300%.

Thessaloniki, the second largest city in Greece, has not been spared. In some of the main shopping streets, more than 50% of the stores have permanently closed down. For the local population, the iron curtains of the closed shops are just the tip of the iceberg; they are the most visible aspect of the austerity shock that hit them in May 2010, when the first memorandum of agreement between Greece and its creditors was signed.

Closed down shops and bankrupted businesses that have turned the nearby industrial zone into a post-apocalyptic landscape; endemic unemployment, long queues in front of soup kitchens, and an ailing health care system: these are the stigmas that have come to traumatize Thessaloniki and its inhabitants.

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In 2015, 1075 stores closed down in Thessaloniki, while only 255 opened. “It’s a Tsunami,” laments Christos Philipidos, the President of the local Merchants Association. “The sector with the highest rate of unemployment is retail; these are our employees.”



The sectors most affected by closures have been fashion retail and the catering business.



According to the National Confederation of Merchant Associations, nearly 30% of shops in the Thessaloniki City Center closed in 2012.



"For Rent" signs ("Enoikoizetai") are ubiquitous throughout Greece and Thessaloniki is no exception. Between 2009 and 2013 Greece's GDP shrank by 25%. During this period, an average of 3,800 people were laid off every week.



Urban advertising has all but disappeared. Even during the holidays, advertising spaces remain vacant. According to City Hall, only 10% of available advertising space was leased in 2015.



A crumbling bus shelter: one of the many scars left by the violent anti-austerity demonstrations that rocked Thessaloniki in the recent past. Due to the drastic drop in public advertisement revenues, the city is unable to maintain or replace any public property.



A gaping hole left by the aborted Metro project, like an urban wound, has disfigured the city aesthetically and burdened it with additional traffic. For locals, it serves as a constant reminder, not only of the Greek state's ineffectiveness, but also of the paralysis that the entire country has suffered since the onset of the crisis.



Though the Metro project was launched in 1990, construction only began in 2006. Completion was projected for the year 2012. Financial misconduct, unfinished research and faulty planning notwithstanding, the accursed Metro project was brutally interrupted by the budget restrictions that were imposed upon Greece. The sudden halt of both national and European investments, and the subsequent bankruptcy of the companies involved, have left Greece's second largest city ripped wide open.



At any moment of the day, dozens of people wait for busses. Lacking resources, people make far less use of their own cars than before the onset of the crisis. Without a Metro or trams, busses – though poorly maintained, expensive and always crowded – have become the privileged means of transportation for the ordinary residents of Thessaloniki.



“Do not photograph our misery...,” a woman asks us before continuing on her way.



Before the crisis, Mixalis Athanasiadis-Novas owned a retail shop that employed 10 people. Forced to close down in 2011, he is now unemployed. At 55 years old, his chances of finding a job are quite slim. His wife is also unemployed and his youngest daughter is still in school. The entire family survives thanks to his eldest daughter's salary: she works for Syriza, the political party currently in power in Athens. One of the early supporters of Alexis Tsipras' party, Mixalis now dedicates all of his time to local political activism.



For over 10 years, Paschalis Batsaris worked as a medical equipment salesman making 3,000–5,000 € per month. In 2012 he found himself unemployed. No longer able to pay his mortgage, he soon lost his home. He currently lives “here and there, hosted by various friends” and sells Koulouris (Greek pretzels, a local specialty) on the street to survive. “When I can make 5–10 € a day, I am very happy”.



A local construction and renovation company owner, Theodore Manousaridis was hard hit by the dramatic decrease in business following the crisis (there was an 80% drop in his sector alone). “Before, 50 workers would be waiting here to go work every morning. Now, if I can hire 10, it is a lot. You should have seen me before, not now. I smile, I survive, but my heart is heavy...”



Founded in October 1971, the Church Agion Panton's Soup Kitchen is the oldest soup kitchen in the city. Thanks to the 40 volunteers and donations from local agricultural businesses, its doors are open 7 days a week. Every day, 500 people receive a hot meal here. The church covers the basic needs of those who are most vulnerable, which includes the elderly, the sick and the undocumented migrants. Since 2015, five students have been housed, free of charge, in an adjoining section of the church. Given the state of need throughout the city, the municipality – which had not been involved in similar kinds of social work until 2011 – has had to open 6 soup kitchens for each of six districts of the city, a “social supermarket,” and a shelter for the homeless.



For the Diocese of Nepal and Stavroupolis, the social work of the church keeps expanding in order to meet ever-growing needs. The 32 food banks & soup kitchens managed by Father Alexander and his colleagues have witnessed a 532% increase in traffic over the past 4 years. (they served 1387 people a day in 2010, compared to 7384 a day in 2014).



In the poor neighborhood of Xirokrini, a small restaurant operated by an Albanian lady is never empty. She offers a combination of a main dish or soup and a drink for the reasonable price of 3 euro.



In this working class neighborhood, most people were employed in either the garment or the manufacturing industry. Before the crisis, unemployment averaged around 9%. In 2014, however, 40% of the neighborhood's working population was unemployed. "Still, let us show that our joie de vivre has not completely vanished."



The industrial zone of Sindos is located 12kms from Thessaloniki. It is one of the oldest and largest in Greece. According to the managers of the zone, 30% of the businesses that were operating there before the crisis terminated their activities by 2010. Some filed for bankruptcy, while others relocated to neighboring Bulgaria and Macedonia. The companies that remain in operation have resorted to massive layoffs in order to survive.



Before austerity paralyzed the Greek economy, this factory manufactured boards, chairs and desks for schools. Since 2011, the government has not replaced any of the basic equipment needed by schools throughout the country. Overnight, this company lost its only client and consequently had to close down. Today, a family of migrants lives in the building's administrative offices. They provide a daycare service in exchange for the permission to squat.



For this company, time stopped on December 9, 2011. Just a year earlier, the company was awarded a certificate labeling it as one of the "Strongest Companies in Greece."



An end-of-the-world atmosphere permeates one of the country's largest industrial spaces.



For locals, the scandal involving the Skouries mine, located some 115 km from Thessaloniki, embodies the political, economic and moral crises that drove the nation to bankruptcy. By 2010, with the government's acquiescence, Hellas Gold (an Eldorado Gold affiliate) launched an open-air gold mine on the northern side of the Chalkidiki Peninsula. The mine is just 2.5 km away from the closest village, and operates in complete contempt of all local environmental regulations.



The low-cost industrial gold panning practiced by Hellas Gold presents numerous environmental threats: deforestation, air and water pollution, and the irreversible disruption of the local ecosystem. The economic desperation is so prevalent, however, that regardless of the risks, the mine receives considerable support from the local population. In a region ravaged by systemic unemployment, miners and villagers alike rely on the jobs provided by the mine.



On the side of the mine's critics, protests have not subsided. They continue despite ferocious crackdowns ordered by the local authorities (400 protesters are currently being prosecuted), and despite Hellas Gold's shameless lobbying of local municipalities and media.



During the general election campaign of January 2015, Syriza was at the forefront of the movement calling for the closure of the mine. In a region where the conservative party New Democracy traditionally prevails, Syriza's promise to close down the mine earned the party an extra parliamentary seat. Although after a year, the mine remains open, it seems that Alexis Tsipras' government is now more inclined to make good on its promise – to the point of engaging in a tug of war with the CEO of Eldorado Gold.

EDUCATION

In March 2014, Kostas Arvanotópoulis, the Minister of Education at the time, broadcast two commercials, in which Greek youths were encouraged to opt for learning a trade and forego longer and more expensive studies. Eight months later, Andréas Lovérdos, his successor in the government of Antonis Samaras, proposed to make up for the shortage of teachers by resorting to unpaid volunteers. The volunteers' sole incentive was a potential advancement in ranking if a position were ever to open in the future.

Public schools and universities as well as students of working and middle class backgrounds bore the brunt of the austerity measures imposed by the Troïka. From 2008 to 2013, the percentage of youths out of work, school or apprenticeship increased by 92.6%. Throughout the country, the administrative staff in schools and universities were reduced to part-time employment. The ensuing strike lasted several months. As for the teachers, 2500 of them were suspended, recruitment was brought to a halt, and the non-renewal of temporary contracts was thoroughly implemented. In December 2015, tenured professors at the University of Thessaloniki were expected to hold classes until 10 pm in order to make up for the scarcity of teachers.



Thessaloniki is a university city second only to Athens. Its “American style” campus is unique in Greece. Built in 1962, the campus residences currently house 400 students. No work or renovations have been carried out on the property since 2008. Previously, these residences were meant for foreign students or Greeks in need of financial aid. However, since 2010, many middle class youths occupy the buildings. Given that accommodations are free, students, who otherwise could no longer pursue their education, put up with the poor living conditions.



Drastic budgetary cuts are visible everywhere on the campus: lack of maintenance of the premises and the green areas, vandalism, graffiti, and the accumulation of trash. In recent years, squatters have occupied the basement of the School of Engineering.



In 2014, due to budget cuts, the University was unable to renew the contract of its waste disposal provider. As a result, for 6 months students trudged to their classes through mountains of garbage. When a new contract was finally signed, over 5000 tons of garbage was removed.



Secondary school Greek teacher and pro bono President of the Odysseas Community School, Antoni Gazakis, recently came close to losing his position. Following an audit, the struggling NGO, Odysseas, was accused of “not respecting accounting norms.” The NGO still owes the State 78,000 € (\$85,000) in fines, which jeopardizes its survival. In light of the Greek authorities’ notoriously lackluster attempts at curtailing tax evasion, the mere fact that a project such as Odysseas would be targeted is as ridiculous as it is shameful. Though Syriza supported the NGO while the party was in opposition, its representatives have taken no measure on Odysseas’ behalf since they have been running the government.



Founded in 1998, the community-run school Odysseas receives no public subsidies: it offers Greek and foreign language lessons in English, Italian, Spanish, German and Russian. Initially, mainly Russian and Albanian immigrants made use of its services. However, since 2010, native Greeks have made up half of the 481 enrolled students. Specific classes tailored for illiterate Greeks are provided as well. Odysseas also offers educational seminars and film showings, free of charge. An amateur theater company has even been created in the school.

HEALTHCARE

Signed in August, 2015 by the Greek State and its creditors, the third Memorandum of Understanding allocates a mere 3.5% of the total health care budget to public hospitals. For other member states of the EU, the average share of the health care budget going to public hospitals is 7%. According to hospital practitioners, the Greek system would need an additional 26,000 health care professionals, including 6000 doctors, in order to function properly.

On the rare occasion that new personnel are hired, their employment is always precarious: a 5-month contract with a salary of 600 € (\$652) per month for a young medical doctor. At this point, the entire system owes its survival to the overly exploited staff. Students and seasoned professionals alike are leaving the country in droves: just in the last 3 years alone, the medical association reports, the city of Thessaloniki has lost 2000 practitioners.

Public hospitals often lack basic sanitization material (alcohol gel, toilet paper, soap, cotton...) and pharmaceutical products (serums, injections). Patients are therefore expected to provide the necessary equipment themselves. Doctors complain about the recent increase in hospital-acquired infections, most notably in intensive care units.

According to Katsiba Dafni, the President of the Union of Thessaloniki Hospital Practitioners, in the last 6 years, life expectancy has decreased by 3 years for women and by 5 years for men – a devolution that is usually only found in war-torn areas.



Created in 2011 with the purpose of providing basic health care services to Greek citizens and migrants deprived of social protection, the Community Clinic operates every day thanks to more than 300 doctors, nurses and pharmacists who volunteer their time. Medications, which are provided for free, are collected through gifts from the local population.



In 4 years, the Center has treated over 30,000 patients. Eva, one of the Center's administrators, points out that Greeks and foreigners are treated equally. Currently, native Greeks represent 70% of the Center's clients. These are people unable to pay their premiums, and are thus banned from the National Health Service. Those who have been unemployed for a long time, including professionals and shop owners who had to close down their businesses, make up the majority of the Center's patients.

Severe health conditions and psychiatric cases are on the rise: people usually only go to the Center when their situation becomes critical. This only further complicates work for the medical team and reduces the chances of recovery for the patients.



In recent years, doctors have regularly held press conferences to alert the public about the dire situation of the Greek healthcare system. However, as time goes by, journalists attend these conferences less and less frequently.

We were not allowed to take photos inside the city's hospitals. "Anyway," Dafni Katsiba told us, "you wouldn't be able to capture the true lack of resources that hospitals face." "You must visit the cemeteries," she added, "if only to notice the younger age at which people are dying as of late. That is where you may witness the social genocide inflicted upon this nation's poor."

Translated by Sacha Le Chêne