

## GREECE

### FROM THE BLACK SHEEP TO THE GOOD EUROPEAN PUPIL: THE HELLENIC FEAT OF ACHIEVEMENT

From now on, Greece can no longer be reduced to the “images of Epinal”, its archaeological beauties or its sapphire-blue waters. The country of Hippocrates is taking its revenge. Like half of humanity, Greece has also been affected by the coronavirus, and the country had all the ingredients for the Covid-19 crisis to become a new tragedy.

And for good reason: the decade of economic crisis (2008-2018) cost the country 25% of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP), i.e. a quarter of its wealth. Added to this have been the cuts imposed by the country's public creditors (IMF, European Union, ECB), which left public hospitals in a state of great fragility: a lack of medical staff, a significant exodus of doctors abroad, and poor health facilities.

However, Greece is surprising, and to date has only slightly more than a hundred victims, for a population of 10.5 million (the equivalent of Belgium). So the question is natural: How did Greece go from being a black sheep to Europe's good pupil in this health crisis? The answer lies in a mixture of several factors.

Starting with the electroshock of neighbouring Italy, which led Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis to take drastic measures very early on: the closure of schools, nurseries and universities, followed by the closure of museums, archaeological sites and some businesses. Anyone breaking these rules could be fined up to €5,000. The borders were also closed, with a compulsory fourteen-week

quarantine in requisitioned hotels for anyone arriving in Greece.

From the first death, on 12 March, these measures, considered to be the strictest in Europe, have been stepped up, with general confinement since 23 March.

These directives have been supplemented by a very proactive communication campaign, with a profusion of preventive messages in all the media and a daily press briefing at 6 p.m. by the highly respected infectious disease specialist, Sotiris Tsiodras.

The latter, whose curriculum vitae is 27 pages long, left the United States and Harvard University to return to Greece a few years ago. Heading the Covid-19 committee, he has, in a firm and emphatic tone, contributed greatly to the discipline of the Greek population. These were harsh decisions, at first contested, especially by the powerful Church of Greece, which is not separate from the State, and which could not conceive of closing its parishes in the run-up to Orthodox Easter, the country's most celebrated holiday. But, with a few exceptions, the country incredibly complied with the rules, going against the clichés spread during the budget crisis, of the “uncivil, undisciplined and insolent Greek”.

All of this effort has come at a price. The Greek Ministry of Finance estimates that this crisis will cost between 10 and 15% of GDP. By way of comparison, in 2011, the most violent year of the economic crisis, Greek GDP fell by 9 points. Moreover, in March alone, more jobs were lost than in the whole of 2012. Finally, tourism, the second pillar of the economy after the merchant navy, is under serious threat and this will have a lasting impact on the country's finances. But the mere fact that the spread of Covid-19 has been contained may well help the Greeks to raise their heads once again. However, this feat is as fragile as it is temporary, and the government is well aware of this.

The infamous example of Moria on the island of Lesbos is a case in point. A reception centre for migrants and refugees, where 20,000 people are crammed together, with a capacity of 4,500 places. This is a disgrace, not only Greek, but also, and above all, European, a symbol of a major lack of solidarity between the Member States, some of which refuse to receive asylum seekers. Although no case of Covid-19 has been recorded in Moria for the moment, the authorities know that the worst can happen.

The European Commission and the European Court of Justice have called on the government to decongest the islands close to Turkey, whose refugee centres are overcrowded. One of the challenges facing the European Union in the coming weeks will undoubtedly be to finally lay the foundations for a humane and fair migration policy, as bold as its budgetary boost to the countries most affected by the epidemic.

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