Field Report from Greece

Adapted from the broadcast audio segment; use the audio player to listen to the story in its entirety.
High up in the mountains of Epirus, lie a group of 43 stone villages known as the ‘Zagorochoria.’

Perched on top of Vikos Gorge these villages have lost generations of men and women who left over past decades in search of work.

After years of neglect, poverty and hardship, these once isolated villages came back to life with the help of European Union funding for local hotels and restaurants.

Kiria Elli, a resident of the village of Vitsa, was born in 1928 and has lived through the Second World War and the Civil War here. She says life has changed dramatically over the last ten years.

"There used to be no water, electricity or roads. That changed, now we have tourism. The hotels. Tourism woke this village up."

That growth has been derailed by the economic crisis.

Local hotel owners say they've only worked a month this year and worry they won't meet their operating costs or be able to pay off their debts.

Kostas Vasdekis, who owns the hotel in the main square worries his two daughters, both graduates, might not find work.

"I worked all my life for their future. Now I don't know what will happen. They want to go abroad. Everything I did, I did it for them."

Even villagers who came back to Greece recently worry they made the wrong choice.

Forty year-old Stathis Vasdekis has opened a new bar in nearby Ioannina. Vasdekis was raised in Germany as a son of guest workers. He returned to Greece three years ago, because he felt 'more Greek than German.'

He says the idea that Germany is reluctant to write-off Greece's debts makes him irritated.

"If anything, Germany owes us because so many of us Greeks went there to work. We helped build their country. And they destroyed Greece during the Second World War and they took money from us. History wrote itself."

Nearby at the University of Ioannina, the buildings are covered in angry student graffiti.

Evi Kita has worked at the university as an administrator for twelve years and has seen her salary cut from 1000 euros [1,300 dollars] a month to just 700 [900 dollars] in the last few months alone.

"In August this year, we went to the bank to get some money out, and we saw something like 100 euros less than in September. We saw we had 150 less than in October. I saw I had 300 euros less than my normal salary."

Things have gotten so bad, university buildings are heated for just two hours a day, for fear of running out of money.

Marina Papadopoulou finished her economics Masters 18 months ago. Unable to find a job in her field, she works behind a bar. She's taken up German and Russian in the hope of leaving Greece.

"My father lost his job because of the crisis. My mother's salary has been reduced. I've been trying to find an extra job in a coffee shop the last couple of months, but no chance."

Dimitris Topalztiki says he wants to pursue a PhD in physics in the UK or Germany. He sees no opportunities awaiting him in Greece.

"It's a waste of time studying for a PhD here, especially as a scientist, or as a doctor. Greece doesn't support you and there aren't any jobs as an academic. It's impossible to develop a product from the lab to the market place since there is no market."
Kita says the problem runs deeper, expressing anger at a system in which it’s impossible to advance without the right political contacts.

"Your work is not recognized and you can’t move your career forward in a meritocratic way. It all depends on your relationship with your boss. Or worse still, who your father is. It’s something that eats you up no matter how much you want to progress."

That frustration is also played out on a daily basis at Ioannina University Hospital where doctors say they’re running out of essential equipment and cancer drugs.

Hospital staff say they’re forced to strike regularly as they see their salaries cut. On those days operations get cancelled. Only emergency cases are dealt with.

Senior surgeon Charalambos Charissis says it’s not just the young who want to leave Greece. Despite returning from France to work here, he too is thinking of leaving.

"I wouldn't like it. I am not ready for it, but I am trying to get myself prepared for it, for leaving Greece forever. If I have to leave Greece now, it would be forever."

The fact that professional, educated people want out, marks a shift from previous waves of migration which saw the loss of mainly unskilled laborers, according to leading economist Antonis Adam.

But he also argues neither Greece's low birth-rate nor the professional 'brain drain' underway are the main problem. He points instead to the failure of successive governments to deliver political reforms, which he says poses a much more serious threat, amid profound fears there is no new political generation to take Greece forward.

"They think politics is all about back-scratching, corruption, getting money. I don't think the new political generation is any better than the previous one. if anything is even worse."

– Reported by Nina-Maria Potts for America Abroad