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In Athens, the mother of all city states, poverty is clearly visible while walking its rundown streets with graffiti sprayed front windows of closed shops. In the past decade, almost daily, there were demonstrations on cuts in wages and public expenditure while creditors increased pressure on subsequent Greek governments to pay back a mountain of debt. What does that mean for a European metropolis like Athens? How are the Greek authorities and the European Union dealing with this perpetual crisis? To answer these questions, we follow the sequence of a classical Greek tragedy.

Prologue – Urban Crisis in Numbers and Images

Reliable data on urban poverty in Athens are not easy to find. Mostly there are only aggregated data on national level. Fortunately, the prefecture of Attica recently carried out research into the working and living conditions in the metropolitan region. We use these data supplemented by some other sources.

Unemployment: While the Greek economy shrunk by 25% since the start of the financial crisis in 2008, unemployment has inversely increased proportionate to around 25% of the working population. Thanks to the overall economic growth, that percentage is now back around 21%, but it
remains by far the highest unemployment rate within the EU. Youth unemployment under 25 is in still soaring at 43.7% - a staggering figure. Unemployment benefits (maximum 360 Euro) are limited in time (maximum one year) and only one in ten jobless Greeks effectively receive a benefit.

**Income:** The average salary is barely 800 Euro per month and nearly a third of the Greek labor force works part-time and earn on average less than 330 Euro monthly – less than the lowest unemployment benefit. Young Greeks with master’s degrees and even PhD’s take a job as a courier and risking their lives on a shaky motorbike for 250 euros per month.

**Pensions:** The crisis pushed many Greeks out of the pension system and many of those still ‘enjoying’ a pension after 40 years or more hard work - within the EU, Greeks work on average the longest days – can hardly make it to pay for basic expenses.

**Poverty:** Greeks losing their job quickly drop below the relative poverty threshold (determined at 60% of the median income). A staggering 23% of the Greek population is in that dire situation. Around 15% of them are extremely poor (less than 200 Euro available income per month). Extreme poverty is most visible in the center of the Athenian metropolis of around 3.6 million inhabitants, but even in richer peripheral municipalities you can see more and more people roaming garbage containers for something useful or edible.

**Housing:** While purchasing a home is now a far-away dream for most families, even renting a small flat can be a real challenge while social housing is nearly non-existent. The declining traditional Greek phenomenon of two or even three generations under one roof is being restored as young unemployed renters return to their parental homes. More and more owners see no other way or are forced to to sell their property to pay the mortgage and/or settle other debts. Many of these houses as well other urban assets end up with speculating Russians and Chinese buyers. More and more home-owning Athenians leave the city and their belongings behind to re-settle in a dilapidated ancestral family house in a remote mountain or island village. This way Athens Metropolis represents a unique case of ‘de-urbanisation’ because of natural depopulation combined with (economic) emigration, by far not compensated by any kind of immigration.

**Migration:** Since 2008, around 600,000 predominantly young highly educated Greeks left the country for mainly economic reasons. The chance they ever come back is slim, as previous waves of Greek diaspora learned. This can result in a significant brain-drain and further constraining the chances to recovery and sustainable prosperity. Although the 60,000 (mainly Syrian and Afghan) refugees and other migrants could be welcomed to compensate for the ten-fold sized emigration, they are largely seen and treated as a heavy burden on the Greek economy and identity. While most refugees only wanted to transit Greece to Germany and other surplus countries, a brutal closure of borders locked them onto inhumane Greek refugee camps for years to come, haunted by neo-fascist militias but also relieved by remarkable solidarity by grassroots organisations balancing on a thin rope to help both impoverished Greeks and non-Greeks running for their lives.

**Taxation:** Pressured by the European Troika (EU, ECB and IMF), successive Greek governments (regardless of the basic ideology) are tightening their belts to better collect existing taxes and to devise new taxes to repay state and bank loans. Consequence: people have to cough up more taxes with less income. The black economy is therefore not really challenged, on the contrary. Only those rich enough to afford a tax advisor can make the most of the tax loopholes. Super wealthy shipowners continue to enjoy tax breaks against the electoral promise of Syriza to ‘end Greek oligarchy’.
Quality of life: According to Eurostat 65% of the 20% relative poor fall short of basic facilities such as electricity, heating, water and communication services, as they cannot longer pay the (increasing) bills. Over 52% of the surveyed said they did not have the opportunity to make an unforeseen expenditure of up to 500 euros. Half of all families cannot afford a holiday, not even one week, while 57% does not have the means to go to a theatrical performance, the cinema or a concert—culture impoverishment. School pupils faint because they don’t get enough food and have to do their homework by candlelight as the electricity was shut down because their parents could not pay the special land tax. Greeks remain disproportionately unnecessarily dying by active and passive smoking because the smoking ban is not respected and curbed. Ditto in traffic: walking and cycling in the city is almost impossible by unpunished speed devils and wild parking. Modern Athens is designed and organized around the car, not around the people. Unlike most other European cities, there is no meaningful change – with the crisis as a bad excuse.

Territorial position: Greece is quite isolated from the rest of the European Union and also has a very complex territorial cconfiguration with a 4000-kilometer-long rough coastline and an archipelago of inhabited islands. Due to geopolitical circumstances, Athens can hardly capitalize on its central territorial position in the Eastern Mediterranean region nor as potential hub on one of the branches of the new Chinese Silk Road, while European cohesion and regional policy has largely failed to integrate Greece in its continental core. Territorial analysts as Cliff Hague even claim that the flawed European Territorial Cohesion policy is at the root of the financial and economic crisis in Europe. 

ESPON maps showing Greece’s and Athens territorial remoteness in the EU
On an ‘optimistic’ note, Greek authorities will brag that Moody’s has ‘upgraded’ Greece’s credit-rating to level B3, meaning ‘less dramatic’. This would mean that the country no longer need to hang on a money infusion and thus could borrow again on financial markets. However, its highly unlikely that the average Kostis and Spiridoula will notice any improvement any time soon - the depression has simply cut far too deep.

Despite the Greek economy’s first recovery signs during the past year or so, the number of homeless and hungry people in Athens’ street has not gone down, on the contrary, due to depleting family capital reserves and unchanged low earnings and benefits. Athens’ streets were never void of poverty but this time entire families with young children sleep on pavements and in the attics of closed shops, queuing long rows for free meals, clothes and medicines. Those still enrolled in the public health insurance system must wait long hours and seriously sick or injured people often are piled up on makeshift stretchers in the corridors of run-down and under-resourced public hospitals with overworked and low paid medical staff – a situation EU should be deeply ashamed of, especially with a left-wing ‘pro-poor’ party in the governing seatvii. Cynically, expensive private hospitals are thriving as never before.

Most of Athens metropolitan areas are visible in decay, even in the ‘richer’ periphery. And although the recent spike of war refugees and economic migrants cannot be blamed for the worst economic depression in Greece since WWII, their impoverished presence in run-down city areas adds up to the public perception of desperation, dangerously exploited by extremist nationalist political parties and militias such as Golden Dawn, one of the most vigilant neo-Nazi parties in EU, with a growing stake in and impact on the Greek parliament.

In 2005, Greece had one of the lowest suicide figures worldwide. Since the beginning of the crisis in 2008, that figure has doubled, and Greece is now the most suicidal country in the EU.
While these figures and images speak for themselves, it is important to remind ourselves that the real Greek tragedy sadly stretches far beyond a protracted economic depression; that there might not be any light at a tunnel with no ending.

In a first episode we will examine how the situation was before the crisis struck. In a second more tragic episode we need to understand the basic mechanism behind the crisis of 2008 and the responses of the Greek and European leaders. In a third and final episode we explore some hopeful survival strategies of Athens battered citizens and administrators.

Episode 1 - The European Charm-offensive

When Athens was declared the capital of modern Greece in 1832, it wasn’t much more than a sleepy village with 400 houses at the foot of the Acropolis and its ruined Parthenon. With the help of the European great powers, the Greek capital quickly extended as a romantic simulacrum of the Antique City state, but without the characteristic autonomy of the classic city state. Successive regional and international conflicts did certainly not help a further Europeanisation of Athens, well on the contrary. By the end of the Second World War, Greece fell prey as the first victim of the Cold War. The horrific Greek Civil War (1945-1949) culminated in a bi-partisan political system the reckless way we experience it now in the USA. After a temporary overhaul by a military junta (1967-74), Greece was quickly admitted as new member of the slowly growing EU, and later even in the Eurozone, despite the obvious mismatch with the admission criteria. Hellenistic-romantic considerations certainly played a key role but maybe even more the perpetual risk of Greece falling prey to the east (again).

Exporting countries such as Germany and The Netherlands also needed new market markets and the Mediterranean Region was then the most logical option. That led to a gradual erosion of domestic industrial production, e.g. the iconic Greek brand of Izola appliances, falling prey of massive export of German-made appliances such as Siemens – still very strong and highly influential on the Greek market and in the politics. Only the growth of tourism and the solid world position of Greek shipping companies kept Greece solvent and credit-worthy.

Backed by international creditors, Greece grasped a historic chance to bring back the Olympic Games to Athens in 2004, financed by cheap loans and implemented with no realistic after-use planning, except for the major infrastructure include new international airport, metro and urban highways\textsuperscript{viii}. 
By accessing the Eurozone, not only the Greek state and banks but also ordinary citizens were tempted to buy on credit, preferably for ‘quality goods’ produced outside Greece. Adding insult to injury, the bipartisan political system also used the cheap loans to hand out bonuses to their partisan constituencies, creating an invisible Olympus-sized debt-mountain that would have intimidated the Olympian chief god Zeus. Knowing Zeus’ temperament, it wouldn’t take too long before his fearful thunderbolt strikes back on the human mortals, hurting most of all the weakest in society.

Famous former Greek brand of appliances, closed in 1991
Abandoned stadium of Olympic Games Athens 2004

**Episode 2 - The European Charge-offensive**

In 2008, the Greek credit-dream ended abruptly. The Wall Street-bubble busted, and the baffled American creditors demanded ‘their’ money back from European lending states and banks. Only the European core countries could somehow manage the crisis but certainly not the smaller and more peripheral countries from Ireland to Greece – all structural deficit countries.

Of those countries, Greece was clearly the most vulnerable one, due to a deep-rooted corruption and reckless spending ‘culture’ among all steps of the social ladder in proportionate ways, highly enabled by German and other foreign corporate companies such as Siemens\(^6\). The ‘Greek corruption’ tag suited European leaders and citizens well to close eyes and ears for the structural inability of Europe to establish a European redistribution and financial cohesion mechanism as in the US, where states cannot default, and the Federal Reserve will always intervene. It must have been crystal clear from the onset of the crisis that Greece could never foot the bill on its own, at the cost of breaking down the entire welfare system beyond repair. The European aid packages were mainly intended to save German and French banks that had invested in Greece, and the Greek population had to pay for it\(^6\).

The consequences are disastrous, so much is clear now. Except for the rescued banks and financial institutions there is only one ‘winner’: political extremism. The combination of double migration, extremely high unemployment and shrinking available incomes is extremely explosive. In other more northerly European cities, a decade-long depression and assault on human dignity is likely to have sparked more massive and more violent public outcry with real political reform. Why not in Athens or other major Greek cities such as Thessaloniki?
How can a population survive for ten years without the basic protection of the state? A common explanation is that Greeks are born and raised in a culture of familial self-reliance, with sun, sea, music and dance as primary antibiotics against poverty and tyranny. That statement is far too romantic but not entirely untrue. The traditional Greek tavern can be viewed as one of the most resilient cornerstones of the survival economy. In times of prosperity a successful tavern grows to a SME, while in times of adversity it falls back on its family-basis, and if necessary, only opens on demand. The tavern works entirely autonomously and usually combines work and residence under the same roof. Even the worst crisis does not stop the Greeks from visiting their favorite taverns over the weekend or on public holidays. The tavern is perhaps the best functioning Greek ‘institution’: always open, simple, efficient and customer-friendly, locally produced and traditionally cooked food and communal dining at reasonable prices. Taverns and by extension occasional family and local parties combine elementary economy and mental health care; something the state cannot (longer) guarantee. A proof of the severity of this crisis is that century old taverns cannot longer meet ends and close doors for good, partially due to mushrooming ridiculously cheap fast food home-delivery by speedy and noisy scooters crisscrossing the city. The circular tavern-economy is now replaced by a sea of disposable plastics to wrap and consume the junk-food; the latter increasing the risks of obesity and related health-risks – thus further straining the health care system and the public spending – a poverty trap.

Civil Society is traditionally very weak all over the Balkan and Athens makes no great exception, traditionally dominated by religious charity and so-called philanthropy of tax-evading oligarchs. However, there are several small-scale but nevertheless significant grassroots Initiatives to resist and alleviate the (extreme) poverty. The German documentary ‘Krisis – Structural Adjustment’ is a great tribute to the relentless volunteers of the Solidarity Clinics, based in the Athens port of Piraeus\(^\text{iv}\). Other great initiatives include the wisely squatted City Plaza Hotel, Victoria Square Project and Earth Organization\(^\text{ix}\), rallying Athens citizens around the 17 Sustainable Development Goals to get Greece back on the human track by 2030.

The incumbent left-wing Greek government has taken a number of steps to alleviate extreme poverty – e.g. through child-allowances, but with very limited impact. Because the weakest in society are both financially and socially most vulnerable, they also don’t count as an electoral force. All political parties will prioritize their major constituency - in the case of the ruling Syriza party this means mainly the civil servants, the army, the farmers and the pensioners (12) – not necessarily the poor.
While the national government is mainly engaged in implementing the EU memorandum and managing its international relations with Turkey and FYROM, local authorities are much closer to the daily reality of urban and rural poverty. In Athens, the former national Ombudsman Giorgos Kaminis was elected as mayor in 2011, in the heat of the crisis. In 2016 he was awarded as second best 'World Mayor'\textsuperscript{xiii}, being praised for his pro-poor and refugees-sensitive policies. Kaminis also engaged with a team of architects and urbanists to provide urban recovery strategies, but there is only as much you can do without a formal planning department, which was abolished by the previous mayor and government. While Athens can be viewed as a proof that a city can survive without a formal planning agency, it is highly likely a re-styled planning approach and agency will boost its chances for sustainable recovery – where there is no long term city vision, people will always perish, human history has learned us since the Ancient Athens City State raised the bar for prosperous yet democratic urban societies. A little bright spot in the current darkness is the Athens Resilience Strategy 2030, sponsored by the American philanthropic Rockefeller Foundation and its 100 Resilient Cities initiative\textsuperscript{xiv}. That plan aims to make Athens more resilient against possible ' shocks ', varying from economic recession to climate change, with projects focusing on a blue-green metropolitan armature and a less car-dependent connectivity network. A proposal for the Athens mayor, initiated by the Athens-based Territorial Capital Institute together with the Dutch Delta Metropolis and ISOCARP, aiming at a Policy Workshop to advise the local and regional leadership on setting up a new-styled metropolitan planning agency did not yet come to fruition. Kaminis and other local actors seem to defy re-establishing an overly rigid and bureaucratic planning agency, more obstructing than enabling the small scale and ad-hoc interventions that did happen outside the planning system.

\textbf{Exodos} – A Matter of Territorial Justice

Answering the question in the title – Greek tragedy or European territorial injustice – it is indeed both. According to Aristotle’s conception of the Greek tragedy, the ' Exodos ' or final speech by the Spectator (reader) must arouse compassion and fear, so that she undergoes a catharsis. Pitying the impoverished Greeks is a bit like sending ' thoughts and prayers ' after every mass-shooting in the United States of America – it might ease a bad conscience but will change nothing substantially. Greek and European political and financial elites are defying any possible catharsis, although there are some cracks in the European ‘hyper-austerity’ ideology\textsuperscript{xv}. The neoliberal economic and monetary policy of the EU and its Member States has proven to risk a social bloodbath to save financial interests. Citizens in other cities and states are warned to accept shrinking welfare state with more authoritarian leadership or run the risk of Greek-styled tragedies. Many will bow heads, but some will resist and advocate more solidarity within and between cities as beacons of human
civilization, re-inventing the once so successful model of the Greek city-states in Ancient times, against the growing financial vulnerability and looming failure of European member-states. Just like in a marathon, originating back to the Ancient course from Marathonas to the city-state parliament of Athens, this will be a long and arduous journey, but worth the effort.

1 I would like to thank Dr. Nicholas Karachalis (TCi associate) and Bruno Tersago (Athens correspondent for the Flemish radio and TV) in particular.
2 Territorial Capital Institute is an Athens based nonprofit and non-governmental organisation that promotes territorial cohesion and solidarity through localized application of the Sustainable Development Goals and UN’s New Urban Agenda.
3 See https://www.dianeosis.org/en/2016/06/extreme-poverty-greece-survey/
4 See http://btersago.com/
6 See http://cliffhague.com
7 See http://www.dewereldmorgen.be/artikel/2018/02/05/humanitairecrisis-in-Greece-it-is-no-bailout-it-is-a-penance
8 It’s a sad reality that most Olympic venues are now either derelict, unused or underused. Many of the coastal venues areprivatised and off limits for ordinary people, addid public injury to the financial insult. Since 2004, Athens became an international benchmark how NOT to deal with the Olympic Games legacy in organizing cities and countries – most successfully applied in the London Olympic Games.
9 See http://www.spiegel.de/international/spiegel/a-swamp-of-bribessiemens-forced-to-battle-internal-corruption-a-451105.html
14 See http://www.100resilientcities.org/cities/athens/
15 See http://www.efsyn.gr:10080/arthetai-megali-ton-ilithion-sholi