

# Greek Trek: Investing in tomorrow's philhellenes

Three Greek-American postgraduate students at Tufts have created an educational tour of the country that launched in March

BY TASSOULA EPTAKILI  
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"My parents moved to Greece from a village in Northern Epirus (southern Albania) in the 1990s, with the dream of returning to their homeland and having fought to keep their Greek identity alive in Albania," says Anastasia Thano, who was born in Athens. "However, in 2009, just before the debt crisis broke out, they decided to emigrate again, hoping for a better future for their children. So we left for the United States."

Dimitris Papachristou's roots go back to Kyriaki, a village in the regional unit of Viotia in Central Greece, on his father's side, and to the southern island of Crete on his mother's side. For professional reasons, the family spent many years in various countries in Europe. Konstantinos Angelakis' grandparents came from Thessaloniki and Messinia. He himself is a second-generation Greek American.

The three met at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University in Medford, Massachusetts, where they are pursuing graduate studies. They not only share Greek ancestry but also a deep love for Greece. "Yes, we love Greece, but that does not mean that we lack the clarity to understand it as a place of intense contradictions, where black and white coexist in almost everything. On the one hand, ancient glory, history, hospitality, the warmth of its people, and on the other, the inflexible state apparatus, the bureaucracy, the brain drain, and often corruption. Hopefully, we can contribute to making a positive difference," Anastasia says.

The idea of making their own modest contribution emerged last summer in a small cafe in Plaka Lasithio, a seaside village opposite the island of Spinalonga on Crete, where they were vacationing. There, drinking raki, they decided to take the initiative: to organize an educational trip, the "Greece Trek" as it was later called, so that their fellow students would have a chance to see "the real Greece behind the window, through authentic experiences that the average tourist finds it very difficult, if not impossible, to experience," says Konstantinos. The university organizes several similar trips each year, mainly to Israel, Japan, Central Asia, and Colombia. However, it had never organized one to Greece.

The three classmates moved heaven and earth to make their idea come to life. They secured sponsorships by reaching out to well-off members of the



The group visited iconic sites like the Acropolis (left) and Meteora (right). It comprised 17 university students from the United States, India, Japan, Kuwait, Mexico, Taiwan and Venezuela. The 10-day program was created with the help of Alexandra Tiligada and Sophia Antoniadou, co-founders of the company Discover Greek Culture.



The group also took its participants to the liquefied natural gas terminal on the islet of Revithoussa, to see one of the country's most important energy infrastructures.

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Greek-American community and began planning their trip. Their key goal, they say, was to build bridges. "Tufts is one of the world's leading universities in the field of international relations, political science and diplomacy, and its graduates are almost certain to occupy positions of power in governments, embassies, international organizations and multinational firms. By showing our classmates the best, the most dynamic part of our country, we are essentially investing in the future, in tomorrow's philhellenes," says Dimitris. "And because the average American understands Greece through the Acropolis-good food-economic crisis triptych, we wanted to break stereotypes, to enrich the knowledge of those participating in the Greece Trek and in other fields beyond Classical antiquity. How many people know, for example, the role that the 1821 War of Independence played in shaping the geopolitical map of Europe at that time? Or the excellent work that is being done in many fields of entrepreneurship and production? There is more than tourism..."

The 10-day program was created with the valuable help of Alexandra Tiligada and Sophia Antoniadou, co-founders of the company Discover Greek Culture. On March 18, a group of 17 students from the United States, In-



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dia, Japan, Venezuela, Taiwan, Mexico and Kuwait arrived in Greece. Emphasis was placed on culture, with visits to museums, archaeological sites, and modern monuments, from the Acropolis, Mycenae and the island of Aegina to Meteora, among others. Representatives of the generation that will shape the world of tomorrow met with government officials and entrepreneurs, gaining insights into various aspects of Greek reality that concern foreign policy, the economy, investments, energy, the refugee crisis and human rights.

They visited, for example, the liquefied natural gas terminal on the islet of Revithoussa, 45 kilometers west of Athens, to see how Greek gas grid operator DESFA is strengthening one of the country's most important ener-

gy infrastructures to effectively meet both current and future energy needs. After being shown around by Fernando Kalligas, DESFA director of corporate affairs, they expressed interest in the regulations that ensure the safety of workers on the island, the residents of the surrounding areas, as well as the protection of the environment. They acknowledged that Greece relies heavily on tourism because of its natural beauty.

At their meeting with representatives of the Union of Greek Shipowners, Andonis Lemos, Dimitrios Fafalios, Nikolaos Veniamis, John Xylas and Katerina Peppas, they were impressed to hear that Greece is currently the top maritime country in the world. Greek shipowners control approximately 21

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percent of the world fleet in terms of capacity, which increased by 7.4 percent during the Covid-19 pandemic. They also learned that the Greek-owned fleet represents 59 percent of the fleet controlled by EU member-states and that one in three ships currently being built worldwide will be delivered to a Greek shipowner. Their questions mainly concerned the safety of commercial shipping, competition with emerging Asian shipping, and environmental sustainability.

In the Kapodistrias Room of the Foreign Ministry, which hosts a statue of Greece's first governor, Foreign Minister Nikos Dendias outlined the priorities of Greek foreign policy. He emphasized the shared vision of Greece and the US on most international issues, including the war in Ukraine. He explained how the earthquakes that struck Turkey earlier this year changed Greek-Turkish relations, ushering in a completely different reality. He also pointed out that the EU cannot indefinitely rely on the military umbrella of NATO and the US for its security but must develop its own defense mechanism.

During their trip, the Tufts students also had the opportunity to meet with, among others, former prime minister, former vice president of the European Central Bank and academic Lu-

cas Papademos, the chief of the Greek military General Konstantinos Floros, Minister of Digital Governance Kyriakos Pierrakakis, Athens Mayor Kostas Bakoyannis, and Migration Minister Notis Mitarachi. They were given a tour of Parliament by MP Dimitris Kairidis, and tried authentic Greek flavors in historic shops, including Yasemi and Cafe Avissinia in downtown Athens and Efrosino in Kastraki, near Meteora.

Ariel Fanger shared: "My participation in the Greece Trek was a one-way street due to your country's unique geopolitical position. Understanding Greek history is crucial in comprehending almost all political systems and institutions. I was excited to visit the birthplace of democracy, with its rich culture, distinctive architecture, diverse landscapes and delicious food. I believe that such initiatives further strengthen the already good Greek-American relations, and this experience will help me become a more well-rounded professional."

For Fatma Sindik, the trip was not only incredibly interesting but also emotionally charged. "I am Turkish Cypriot, born in Famagusta. My mother is from Trabzon and speaks Pontic Greek. I grew up in the Bronx in New York, being exposed to Greek and Turkish cultures, seeing Greeks and Turks living together in harmony, loving and protecting each other. I took dance lessons at the Greek club across from our house. Watching my friend Maria, I also learned the zeibekiko dance. So, I wanted to visit the country that so much contributed to shaping my personality through its culture, to get to know it better. And I am happy about that."

Anastasia, Dimitris and Konstantinos have every reason to feel content. The first Tufts educational trip to Greece was a great success. Will there be a follow-up? "That's the goal," all three agree. "We paved the way, and we hope that other Greek or Greek-American students will take it on from here. Besides, there is the Karamanlis Chair in Hellenic and European Studies, which is a significant bond. Educational tourism is not seasonal tourism, and we believe that Greece is ideal for organizing such trips for students of social and humanitarian studies, fine arts, philosophy, and other scientific fields. This is what an outward-looking mentality means to us," says Alexandra Tiligada and Sophia Antoniadou of Discover Greek Culture. "After all, culture is also politics."

## What happens in France doesn't stay in France

COMMENTARY | BY GEORGE PAGOULATOS \*

In recent weeks France has been shaken by constant and violent demonstrations. The reason is the increase in the retirement age from 62 to 64. The reform is highly unpopular but is key to Emmanuel Macron's program, and what he was elected upon as president. It was not voted through in parliament, but Macron pushed it through by decree, as the Constitution allows. A motion of no confidence against his government was defeated in the parliament.

It is somewhat ironic that an increase of the retirement age to 64 should generate such fierce resistance, when in most EU countries the limit is 65 or 67. The reform seeks to render the pension system sustainable, so as not to be forced to burden the economically active population with higher contributions (as the Spanish government recently did). Some governments would rather eschew the pain of pension reform (a policy of pain avoidance and procrastination by Greek governments pre-2009 crash-landed the country in steep pension cuts and prolonged austerity in 2010). In rapidly aging Italy, the populist coalition of Salvini and the Five Star Movement in 2018 revoked the age limit increase to 67 that had been painfully implemented by Fornero and Monti in 2011 – Italian governments have avoided meddling with the pension system ever since, even though it remains highly unsustainable. "Leave it for later," political cunning dictates. But Macron is far more ambitious than that for his country.

But France defends its exceptionalism with a well-known intolerance of reform, penchant for protest, and proclivity toward a romanticization of violence. In part, pensions are just the trigger. The conflicts have moved from Paris to small towns, burdened by the rising cost of living and fuel prices. From the neglected towns (Le Pen's strongholds) sprang the Yellow Vests in 2018 – France has its own incoherent province too...

The French paradox is not the root



Tourists look at a banner reading '64, it's no,' hung by the French CGT labor union to protest the government's pension reform, on the top of the Arc de Triomphe in Paris, on Wednesday, as President Emmanuel Macron met with union representatives.

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causes but France's privileged position in dealing with them. Job insecurity – but unemployment is at 7%, the lowest in 15 years. Anti-globalization – France is predominantly a vector of state autonomy and a pursuer of EU autonomy to moderate globalization's adverse effects. Income inequality – but income inequality in France is among the lowest in Europe, the French education and health system enviable, France posting some of the highest rates of public and social spending. The greater the

social acquis, the fiercer the coalition mobilizing in its defense.

The protest is directed against the "authoritarianism" and "arrogance" of President Macron. In the French version of anti-elitism, the above stereotypes are alternated with their exact opposites: When the president is not authoritarian and arrogant, he is weak and indecisive. In any case unpopular. French presidents are unloved by the French people. Once they get elected, they are disliked until they are gone. Often, the resentment of presidential "arrogance" is the price of executive effectiveness.

Mass demonstrations are not just a release of social tension. They are factors of radicalization, offering an experiential school in extreme political protest and clashes with the police. Melenchon seeks to expand and consolidate his party's electoral appeal by locking broader social strata

into leftist radicalization. The brutality of the French police force helps.

The big picture of what goes on in France should be of broader European concern. France's internal reforms are typically directly linked to France's influence in Europe. Mitterrand adopted the "franc fort," abandoning wage increases to defend France's standing against Germany. Macron negotiated domestic reforms with Merkel in exchange for reform of the eurozone. Germany did not follow up, but with the Recovery and Resilience Fund Macron had the last word. France's interests, even in their hegemonic version, are identified with a strong Europe. Hollande fought hard to prevent Grexit; Macron led the joint EU response to Russia's aggression in Ukraine, after having exhausted all diplomatic efforts; and today Macron is pushing for a common EU industrial and technology policy, in defense against overseas protectionism.

From Europe's common defense to fiscal integration, Macron's policies are fully aligned with the strategic aspirations for a stronger Europe, which happen to be identical to those of Greece. For Europe, Macron is France at its best, but Macron's problem is France. If Macron caves in to the protests, his credibility will be irreparably damaged, along with his leadership role in Europe.

Le Pen is the big winner so far, reaping the benefits of protests without identifying with the vandalism, and in the 2027 election she will ride the wave of counter-reform. She is the second most popular politician in France, above Macron. Left-wing extremism carries water in Le Pen's mill – anti-Europeanism and the abolition of the 64 retirement age. If Le Pen ends up succeeding, the implications for Europe would be devastating.

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## Reforms with a marginal majority?

COMMENTARY | BY KOSTAS KALLITSIS

If you win the election, you get the state – that's the rule in Greece. The state is the winner's prize. Hence politicians' worship of absolute majority governments and their abhorrence of coalitions: The victor does not want to share the spoils with anyone else and prefers to reap the benefits arising from his power undisturbed.

A common argument against coalition governments is that they are almost doomed to fail in Greece, because we don't have a state that can do its job well, regardless of its changing managers. The truth is that in Greece we do not have an effective state, because the single-party administrations that have governed – with small, short-term exceptions – have not allowed it. That is because they treat the state as booty.

Politicians who declare their determination to clash with the "unchanging state" (and in whose ministries the queues of people waiting for political favors rival the number of ministry employees) are parading on our TV screens. It would probably be enough for them to clash with themselves, as they have turned the state into a tool to expand their clientelistic relationships and feed their networks. All they want is to serve their political, party or even personal pursuits. What we have is a public field of expanded corruption.

In this toxic environment, the most conservative and self-serving professional groups flourish, while the few true public servants struggle to keep the country afloat. But this state of affairs has been created with the cooperation of all governments – not against their will.

The national tragedy at Tempe, where two trains crashed head-on, killing 57 people, came to remind us that this state is rotten, that its side effects are poisonous and even deadly. Nowadays, when the role of the state is upgraded in the developed world and it is accepted that without an or-

ganized state and public-private sector cooperation there is no future for development, Greece is still plagued by a clientelistic, backward state, which not only does not complete its complex current tasks, but has also proved dangerous to the lives of its citizens.

Its radical reform is the most vital issue. It is also the most difficult. It presupposes the agreement of wider political and social forces, on the

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basis of a long-term plan, through a meaningful, disciplined, democratic dialogue.

How can state reform proceed? Perhaps from a government with a large popular majority, which will have a clear vision and a basic plan for a modern, democratic state that will be friendly toward its citizens and facilitate economic growth. In today's conditions, a government based on a large popular majority can only be a coalition government. As for the other prerequisite, the basic plan, there is none in sight.

How can state reform not proceed? I think it cannot proceed with a majority, one-party government – thanks to the electoral law, it would have a marginal majority in the Parliament and limited public appeal. The reform that the majority government of New Democracy failed to achieve in its four years in power (when there was optimism and great expectations), would perhaps take a miracle to achieve in a second, four-year term, with a marginal majority, a shorter horizon to implement its program, intensifying intra-party activity and with limited patience from society.