

1. IS THIS A COUNTRY FOR YOUNG PEOPLE ?

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Is this a country for young people?

COMMENTARY | BY MANOS MATSAGANIS *

“Life can only be understood by looking back,” Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard once wrote, and looking back on my own life I realize how lucky my generation was, growing up in the 1970s and 80s to have lived in a more peaceful, safer, and more optimistic era than the present. On the contrary, our children’s generation will have to live in a much bleaker world: with wars on our doorstep, the specter of irreversible climate catastrophe looming, and the sense that the fate of the world is held by inadequate people full of complexes. And as if all this were not enough, children coming of age, especially in our corner of the planet, have to face additional obstacles in their search for happiness. A society that is nepotistic by conviction, a labor market

that is biased against young people, a social protection system that insists on prioritizing pensions over daycare centers, a housing market inaccessible to those without strong family support, and a public debt that is mounting, narrowing Greece’s horizons. One indication of how great the impasse experienced by today’s young people is provided by the number of births, which, since the post-war baby boom era, has functioned as a kind of “vote of confidence” in the future: In Greece it has fallen to 68,000 in 2024 from 118,000 in 2008 (a 42% drop, the second largest in the EU after Latvia). The reality is ominous, but the question is what we can do to reverse it – after all, the (same) philosopher

added that life “must be experienced looking forward.” This question not only concerns the government (let us all ask ourselves if we are giving opportunities to young people in situations that are within our control – e.g. in our professional environment), but it is the main one that should be mobilized. To its credit, the government does not seem completely unaware of the problem, judging by the tax measures announced at the Thessaloniki International Fair by Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis, the recent activism in housing policy, or the initiatives to repatriate those who pursue careers abroad. Are these enough? The easy answer is “no.” A more honest answer would acknowledge that the problem is huge and to some extent beyond

the control of (any) government. But again: There is room for action, and significant action at that. Let me ignore for now the biggest and most difficult problems, for which the government had created great expectations which were subsequently crushed, such as the much-discussed upgrade of the country’s production model, without which the Greek economy will never be able to create many good jobs. Let’s also ignore initiatives in favor of young couples that I have mentioned in previous articles – such as the commitment that every child born in the country will have a free place in a good nursery in their neighborhood (it would cost us 1% of the pensions budget) or the mandatory paid leave for every employee who becomes a father (at the expense of the

state, not the employer), measures that not only contribute to the mental health of young people and their children, but also return higher benefits to the economy than they cost. Let us limit ourselves to the government’s policy on research, which to some seems an unnecessary luxury, but will affect the country’s economic potential in the future. In order for Greeks who excel abroad to return and start a family, but also to give opportunities to worthy individuals who never left, tax exemptions are not enough. What is needed is realistic prospects for advancement in an elementary meritocratic environment. On the contrary, the systematic neglect of (public) universities and research centers, the hostile bureaucracy, the government’s indifference

to the evaluation (and support) of those who work in them, as well as the scandalous management of EU funds that flow into the country – such as the “Trust Your Stars” program – send a clear message: “Leave or stay where you are, with no prospects.” Their responses (in the recent “Youth Survey” of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation with the National Center for Social Research) show that this is exactly what they are thinking of doing. * Manos Matsaganis is a professor of public finance at the Polytechnic University of Milan, and head of the Greek and European Economy Observatory at the Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP).