

## THE SCOURGE THAT WON'T GO AWAY

Greece and corruption

Q&A

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*For as long as anyone can remember corruption has been at the center of the perennial Greek crisis of politics, society, and economic stability. Even after nearly ten years of unprecedented punishment by the EU “bailouts” Greece remains as corrupt as before. Is there anything that can be done to break this fatal deadlock?*

Corruption, both private and public, enjoys such a long tradition and roots so deep that it would take a cataclysmic jolt to bring about even moderate change. Corruption is practically synonymous with Greek “government” and public “ethics.” Bankruptcy, and the disastrous “bailouts” that have turned Greece into a subject nation of limited sovereignty, has only made a bad situation infinitely worse.

The catastrophic “internal devaluation,” introduced by the IMF and accepted as the must-do recipe by Brussels and Berlin, has done *nothing* in defeating the old corruption practices. If anything, the pauperization of millions has led to the *strengthening* of such traditional national sports like tax evasion, bribery, and out-and-out embezzlement of public funds.

Greece routinely claims the honor of being the most corrupt EU state (on par with Italy). One of the key incentives to cheat, bribe, and steal is the almost guaranteed non-punishment of offenders. Those empowered to enforce the laws—investigators, judges, inspectors—are a major part of the problem because they themselves are frequently open to “special arrangements” in exchange for money. Courts are also inclined toward unnecessary, and damaging, leniency. The example of a “para-judicial ring” discovered *thirteen* years ago is a good demonstration of how such serious cases of malfeasance and corruption are treated: all those recently found guilty received sentences that were immediately suspended.

***Greece's tortuous bureaucracy is often blamed as the major enabler of corruption. What is being done to correct this part?***

The short answer is “nothing.” The reason is (fearfully) simple: Greece is dominated by a huge public sector which is the traditional repository of thousands upon thousands of low skilled, or unskilled, voters, who would otherwise be joining the dole line and thus becoming disaffected and prone to vote in ways that can be damaging to political party targets.

The category of “unemployable” has thus been stricken off the list by Greek politicians, who are always on the hunt for more votes. The bloated public sector has been called “an army of occupation” for good reason: its gargantuan appetite for funds undermines a struggling private economy and its terrifying ineffectiveness only adds to crippling deficits and the odyssey the average Greek faces in his constant interaction with the government, the level of which is unknown in most advanced Western countries.

Repeated attempts to produce an accurate figure of how many “public workers” are on the payroll have arrived at questionable results. The total has fluctuated over the years from a low of 400,000 to near one million. Ministries either bluntly refuse to provide the number of their employees or, more simply, admit they have no idea of how many people they employ. To add insult to injury, the public sector is also populated by many corporations and organizations operating under “public law,” which translates into added significant burdens placed upon the central government budget. Attempts at inventorying these entities have suggested figures as large as 4,000 or even higher.

The private citizen is thus consumed in battling this enormous bureaucracy daily. The most notorious traps he faces are tax offices, city planning authorities, municipal government, and public hospitals. The ubiquitous *fakelaki*, the small envelope containing cash for oiling lower level, usually inept and lazy, bureaucrats, is one of the most cherished aspects of Greek corruption. Such is the depth of the problem that the *fakelaki* is “positively” perceived by many as the only way of infusing a degree of “efficiency” in otherwise ossified and hostile government-run bureaucracies.

To add to the impasse, the very nature of the Greek economy, dominated by a handful of government-connected criminal oligarchs, allows the kind of unholy alliances that kill competition and severely limit the room for a healthy private economy. Anyone wishing to prosper via legitimate means only is almost always condemned to slow painful death—unless he learns the game early, joins the corrupt club of the “insiders,” and begins paying what is in effect protection money allowing him a degree of controlled “liberty.”

***Western observers have difficulty understanding how Greek governments can tolerate this state of affairs. The scandalous failure to prosecute and punish wrongdoers undermines the very credibility of the country yet nobody seems concerned. What is going on?***

You won't find a single Greek politician who is not a fervent defender of what is right and proper—but only in theory and during parliamentary debates.

Since the fall of the junta in 1974, the cases of public corruption that were successfully prosecuted can be counted in the fingers of just one hand. Most notoriously, for instance, the prosecution of the late PM Andreas Papandreou, perhaps the one single man most responsible for the blossoming of the post-junta culture of party cronyism and “small gifts” demanded by public officials, ended in a political fiasco from which Papandreou's conservative accusers never recovered. Governments that followed the Andreas regime, both socialist and conservative, plodded along the same path of expanding and strengthening corruption networks colloquially known in Greece as “intertwined interests.” More recently, the prosecution and imprisonment of a [former defense minister](#) was more the result of his own glaring carelessness in keeping detailed records of his avarice rather than due to determined sleuthing by investigators.

The apogee of this long process of lawlessness, impunity, and political sleaze was reached after the current radical left SYRIZA government took over in 2015. Armed with the pathos of the *nouveau riche*—SYRIZA never grew beyond 4 pc of the vote in its days in the wilderness before 2015—the newcomers have instituted an orgy of cronyism and promotion of the worst and most uneducated “challenged” dumbest as the foundation of their claimed “rebirth of democracy.”

SYRIZA's magical transformation from a far-left “revolutionary” groupuscule to a fervent pro-EU “social democratic” party, after Greece suffered a [severe hiding](#) in the hands of Germany and her allies over SYRIZA's unpalatable early escapades, helped in *reinforcing* its rampant domestic corruption—which still remains way beyond anything the country has experienced so far and is conveniently “unseen” by the self-righteous Berlin-Brussels axis as long as SYRIZA *delivers on cue* as in “resolving” problems like the FYROM-Macedonia name issue via humiliating Greek concessions.

Faced with an imminent general election, conservative New Democracy party leader, Kyriakos Mitsotakis, promises sweeping changes to correct many of the ills associated with corruption. But, as politicians before him, he shall have to contend with a culture of corruption so deeply entrenched that it cannot be tackled but with countermeasures almost certainly beyond tolerance for even Greece's imperfect and hobbling democracy.

***Where do we go from here then?***

There is practically no hope of something spectacular happening on the corruption front in the immediate future.

All current dynamics at work are negative: the electorate is badly fragmented and confused;

SYRIZA has passed an electoral law of simple proportional representation that guarantees weak coalition governments and constant repeat elections; any future government will have to battle the legions of SYRIZA appointees in the public sector determined to wage guerrilla warfare aiming to defang *any* attempt, however nominal, to investigate, let alone prosecute, even glaring cases of corruption and mismanagement by the ex-“radical revolutionaries” turned “plutocrats;” *the true extent and depth of corruption remains unexplored*, with even organizations thought to be relatively “safe” turning out to be immersed in graft and embezzlement; and there is no discernible political “coalition of the willing and able” to pursue the type of severe enforcement necessary in a country that often resembles South American “republics.”

As for the possibility of a mass “hearts-and-minds” campaign to change attitudes and cultural stereotypes, which is often quoted by optimists as the most desirable and effective method to trigger change, any attempt of this sort will require an immense organized effort that the Greek state is unable—and some will say unwilling—to undertake.

In any case, and even in the hypothetical event of such an effort being launched and succeeding even partially, it will take at least a generation until some of the positives could be observed at the practical everyday level. Meantime, Greece will continue to trudge along a treacherous and damaging road to nowhere.