

How Brexit gives hope to the long-suffering Greeks

Ambassador Leonidas Chrysanthopoulos explains how Brexit offers hope to the Greek people that one day, they too may be able to achieve their independence. The Greeks have suffered greatly at the hands of the EU, which imposed on it an extreme form of austerity over the past decade – with tragic consequences.

When the issue of the UK's departure from the EU was finally settled by the December 2019 election result, many in Greece saw it as a victory against the EU establishment that has done everything possible to reverse the outcome of the 2016 referendum.

Us Greeks have painful experience with the EU ignoring referendum results. 61.3% of Greek voters voted against further austerity measures in our referendum of July 2015, only to see the result reversed by the adoption of further austerity measures just one month later.

The cumulative austerity forced on Greece by the EU resulted in the loss of 28% of our national income, unemployment at 27% (compared to 7% before austerity), with youth unemployment at more than 65%. We suffered a wave of suicides as a result. The annual number of deaths rocketed from 70,830 in 2013 to 124,832 in 2017, and was still as high as 121,349 in 2019.

The UK departure creates an important precedent that gives hope to the many Greek people who want to leave the EU: that one day, they too will be able to achieve their independence.

There is another category of Greek citizens who are concerned about the UK's departure from the EU. It is those people who

have close ties to the UK, particularly relatives of people working, studying, or who have business interests there.

According to UK government statistics, there are more than 12,000 Greek nationals employed in the UK. This category of concerned Greeks is worried about the repercussions of Brexit for their relatives in the UK, and in particular how it will affect their work there, their residence permits, their social security benefits etc.

The parents of students at UK universities are worried that tuition costs may double or triple after departure. Business people are concerned about the changes that departure will bring to their commercial transactions with the UK as well as the Greek shipping companies that are established in London.

There are also fears that the tourist sector might be hit, since about 2.5 million UK citizens visit Greece every year. These are all issues that will be dealt with in the settlement agreement that will be negotiated between the UK and the EU this year, and it will be a relief when these uncertainties are resolved.

The Greek governments were not happy with the final departure outcome of the UK, but have emphasised that calm must prevail. They suggest that the UK's exit does not mean the end of the EU but a new beginning. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Greece has created a website to help Greek citizens and also UK citizens residing in Greece receive answers to their concerns over the departure of the UK.

Greece at present is mostly preoccupied at this time with an aggressive Turkey that is trying to restrict Greece's access to hydrocarbons in the East Mediterranean, and with the uncontrollable influx of refugee-migrants to the country. Yet despite the personal concerns mentioned above, a great number of its citizens are happy with Brexit, since it gives them hope that it may be possible in the near future to renegotiate

the so-called debt arrangements with its lenders, or even to exit the EU if the people of Greece vote for an anti-EU political party.

The more that the UK's full exit takes place smoothly, the more it becomes possible for Greece and other countries to exit the EU. Yet vigilance is still required, since the EU establishment may strike again during the negotiations for the settlement agreement.