

The Lonely Mediterranean

Every year, the world descends on Greece, a country known for its warmth and hospitality. But for the residents, a crisis of loneliness threatens to tear a culture of family apart. [Tom Flanagan](#) investigates what an increasingly lonely Europe can learn from the Mediterranean nation.



It's 10:30pm in Athens and Christos has been scrolling through loneliness threads on Reddit. He prefers to speak at this time because everyone in his family is asleep. It's quiet in western Piraeus, the port city in Greater Athens that is eastern and central Europe's busiest passenger terminal and one Christos calls home. That doesn't stop the loneliness from creeping in.

For the past months, Christos has begun the lengthy undertaking of studying for the Pan-Hellenic exams, the national tests every Greek has to sit in order to pass school and move into higher education. While a mandatory process, it requires commitment and time. The latter is hard to find – unless something gives. For some teenagers, that could be their after-school activities. But for many like Christos, it's their friendships.

“Many of us cut ties with our friends because we have to study for five-to-eight hours a day,” says the 18-year-old. “People my age are supposed to be social, but with our whole days packed with studying, there is little time to socialise.”

The studying begins at least two months before the exams, but often it's much earlier. Christos' days, he says, begin to blur into one. He has friends who he tries to go out for food with. But it feels like it's getting harder. He still spends most days alone. When it comes to being around people, something's not the same.

“To me, loneliness does not mean to be alone,” says the 18-year-old. “It means to feel alone, even with people around you. It makes me wonder what I have done wrong all these years to feel so lonely now.”

He says this even knowing he has a good family. Greece, after all, is a culture where there's always family nearby. But that makes feeling alone harder to talk about.

“Looking for support is taboo here; people call you crazy and mentally impaired if you do that. ‘Man up’ they'll say,” he explains. “Despite us Greeks being warm and extroverted people, loneliness among young people is common.”

He's not wrong.

Research on loneliness in Europe has been ongoing for over a decade and the findings are confronting for a nation that has traditionally allied itself to the notion of family. A 2018 study by the European Joint Research Centre (JRC) – the EU Commission's scientist-led community that informs EU policy – discovered that one in 10 people in Greece reported feeling lonely

for most if not all of the time and that 43 per cent of Greeks felt socially isolated, the highest number in Europe. According to a 2017 Gallup World Poll, Greeks reported as having the least social support – defined as friends and relatives that they can count on – of anywhere in Europe.

It's even more pressing for the elderly, who are often the most susceptible to loneliness. Greece has Europe's highest share of population aged 65+ at 22 per cent according to ELSTAT (the Hellenic Statistical Authority). Couple that with the percentage of 65+ who are at risk of poverty (21 per cent); those who suffer from chronic illnesses (69 per cent); and those who have some form of disability (62 per cent via Eurostat 2018) and the numbers paint a harrowing picture. In fact, World in Data combed reports from 2006-2018 to gauge which countries of respondents aged 65+ self-reported the highest for loneliness – Greece came out on top at 62 per cent.

Greece has been lonely for years. Then the pandemic happened.

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Loneliness has long been stratified as an issue affecting senior citizens, yet the pandemic revealed that it's one that affects all ages. Gallup's 2022 Global Emotions Report found that 330 million adults go at least two weeks without talking to a single friend or family member – and that one-fifth of all adults do not have a single person they can rely on. Another EU study by the JRC found that loneliness doubled in Europe during the pandemic, magnifying an existing problem in countries like Greece. And a 2023 report by the JRC for the European Parliament Pilot Project on Loneliness – where Greece scored highest on loneliness alongside Ireland – presented loneliness as a serious public health concern.

Greece is in many ways a microcosm of a problem countries around the world, but especially European ones, are facing. And while Greece's economic obstacles, culture of family

and classical context give it its own flavour in terms of loneliness, it's an interesting case rather than an uncommon one.

In 2009, Greece's economic woes fuelled feelings of loneliness as residents were forced to leave the country or move home, as a sense of helplessness set in. One 2021 JRC report – which researched so-called 'lonely places' by combining economic, physical and social determinants of loneliness like area with a lack of a service provision and a declining population – found that Greece had the highest number of 'lonely places' in all of Europe.

Over a decade since the crash, a country once at the precipice of collapse now faces new loneliness-related challenges – even as its economy rebounds – with an ageing population and the threat of climate change. Greece's problems might be local but the ramifications of these have global consequences in the conversation surrounding loneliness. If anything, it's a glimpse of how a hotter, ageing, more digital and increasingly globalised Europe is only set to worsen the problem.

Take health. A 2020 study dedicated to the long-term health effects of loneliness in people aged 50 plus suggests that it increases risks of heart failure, strokes and dimension by anywhere from 30 to 50 per cent. For those with existing health problems, risk of death increased fourfold.

As for the environment, a changing climate in the global south is pushing people northwards, increasing migration. These refugees are already more susceptible to feelings of loneliness, according to the same 2020 study. In Greece, migrants are one of the fastest-growing groups and the most lonely; a snapshot of the problems people face arriving in Europe and ones the continent needs to address. Elsewhere, the risks of climate loss for those already in Europe is fuelling loneliness too, as the wildfires in Greece show.

It's a bleak vision of the future – and the Mediterranean nation is already struggling to cope.

What makes somewhere lonely is a complex question. The economy and environment play a role but the findings across a number of reports paint a peculiar picture for a country like Greece with a rich history of community. After all, the world's perceptions of Greek culture are often clichéd ones; a luminous family ideal that centres on serene Aegean blues rather than its melancholic shades.

And to Christos's point, many in Greece don't even believe loneliness exists. In fact, a 2018 study commissioned by the JRC found that media coverage of issues relating to loneliness was “low to non-existent”. Travel journalist and founder of website The Greek Vibe Maria Paravantes said loneliness is not something commonly recognised in the country.

“Loneliness has never been an issue in Greece due to our close family ties,” she says. “A majority of families usually live in the same building in urban centres or in houses in rural areas. The extended family bond is strong leaving little room for loneliness.”

That at least, is the perception.

It's 6pm in Avlida, a village about 70 km from Athens. The light is catching in Georgia's home situated on the outskirts of town. She sits down to make herself comfortable, her work for the week done. She's a lawyer and has been for over 10 years now, in a career that has taken her across Greece. The job she says, she can manage. It's the loneliness that's harder.

“It feels like emptiness. Huge, gaping emptiness,” explains the 38-year-old. “It's feeling like there's no point.” She smiles,

somberly. “It's just a numbing sadness. Constantly”

“There is a lot of shame when it comes to loneliness. Nobody dares to talk about it”

It wasn't always that way.

It began 10 years ago when Georgia moved to Kythira, an Ionian island and the home of Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love. She's half-Greek, half-English, and grew up flitting between the two countries. But she never felt at home in England, not the way she did in Greece. So, after studying for her law degree in England and spending a few months in Greece as part of her Erasmus exchange, she finally decided to take the plunge and make Greece her permanent home.

“I was working as an apprentice to a lawyer at the time and he suggested we go to this little island where there was a case about a shipwreck. And I went there to Kythira and thought ‘I love it here. It's beautiful’. He said maybe I could open some offices.”

The plans to expand the offices fell through but Georgia's desire to be in Kythira didn't. So she moved out there. It felt, she says, like a dream.

“I was elated, I was so happy, I was motivated, I just loved it,” she says.

“And the good thing was that I had friends who were still studying here.” She pauses. “It was just amazing. It was me living my dream and loving it.”

But as the weather changed, so did her feelings towards the island. She lived alone in a small village but that didn't matter when it was warm outside and people were mingling. In the summer, the place was alive and buzzing. By the winter, most people had already left. Georgia's friends moved on while she stayed put. And the island's small community withdrew into itself.

“I'd spend months on my own,” says Georgia. “I used every ounce of creativity to occupy my time. I started a driftwood business, making keepsakes out of the material. I would make and make and make.”

It wasn't enough to stave off the feeling of being alone.

Things worsened. Soon, she had turned to alcohol. “I did it just to have something to do at night. I started to lose my grip on reality. I'd be having conversations with myself from multiple perspectives because I had no other external stimulation, so I could only talk to myself.”

Her experience isn't uncommon. Psychologist Dr Vassia Sarantopoulou is head of the Anti Loneliness project based out of the Netherlands and has worked with clients grappling with loneliness for over 15 years. She says while most of us will experience loneliness

at some point in our lives, there's a difference between the 'normal' kind and the more insidious type. What Georgia describes is the latter.

"We all experience loneliness," she explains. "It's your brain saying something needs to change. This first part is normal. It gets bad when it's chronic, when we end up believing the most awful things about ourselves. It can transform into isolation."

Dr Sarantopoulou says that getting out of this can be hard and made harder still by the way we choose to manage it. "There are two main ways we manage loneliness in a maladaptive way: when we say it's fine and that we don't need connection, just because we don't want to face the pain of being rejected. And when we're so desperate to connect with somebody, we'll connect with anybody."

Georgia's lowest point came after breakups where she sought connection anywhere, and partly because of a culture which she says always saw her as an outsider. "I'd throw myself into everything," she explains breathlessly. "But it's especially hard as a single woman and because people saw me as a foreigner. Most of my friends were inherited from male partners. I've realised that Greeks don't want to get into it and connect on a deeper level. They'd rather cut people off."

This is most apparent when it comes to families and for the partners entering into them. "Families have the power to cut people off," she explains. "The sons feel like they are tied to their mothers, so they put the mother first and that limits their commitment to everything."

"The Greeks cannot think of being alone"

With this, a new kind of loneliness is born – one from a culture that pits the individual versus the collective. In a country where the majority of families live in close proximity, there's little room for anything, let alone the notion that somebody could feel alone. But it's this very lack of dialogue that Dr Sarantopoulou explains is the root of loneliness and why it's such a prevalent feeling.

"There is a lot of shame when it comes to loneliness. Nobody dares to talk about it," she says, recalling how when she started the Anti Loneliness project and spoke at events, people would actively avoid coming to her stand. "People see the word loneliness and they run. And it's not surprising because so often people

are met with negative reactions or unhelpful advice like saying you need to make more of an effort to be sociable."

The Greeks might not believe in loneliness but they do feel it. One striking study by the OECD Better Life Index – which measures well-being across 11 indicators essential to quality of life – ranked Greece as the lowest-scoring nation of those polled on community, not just in Europe but in the world. Dr Sarantopolous says the results are both surprising and not.

"What happens in a collectivist culture like Greece is that you're supposed to share the same values. But when you have individualistic values, you're immediately on the outside. You make a choice: you're either a lone wolf or you conform."

Greek history, at least, has taught us this.

On the outskirts of Troy, Achilles sits alone in his tent as a war wages on. Along the beaches, soldiers' corpses lay scattered on the sand. The Greeks cry for help from Achilles. But in his tent, the only thing he hears is silence.

He refuses to join the battle – dishonoured by King Agamemnon for stealing the woman he won in battle – even as his countrymen die around him. He's unsure what he feels, but in the venerated halls of Greek mythology and Homer's Iliad, the solitary Achilles is a glimpse of the loneliness that has always existed in Greek culture.

Angelos Chaniotis, a professor in ancient history at the Institute for Advanced Study in New Jersey has been researching loneliness in antiquity for years. It's why he's less shocked by the prevalence of loneliness in modern Greece.

"It is a phenomenon that affects the Greeks painfully. But how it affects us then and now is different," explains Professor Chaniotis. "Loneliness was understood, and still is, as something terrible. And that's because the narratives of Greece surround the family. Everything shows us that the Greeks want to be around people."

In ancient Greece and mythology, being alone wasn't just undesirable – it was also simply uncommon. Concepts of space and loneliness didn't exist in the same way because there was no reason to ever be on your own.

"The Greeks cannot think of being alone," says Professor Chaniotis. "There is an obsession with being part of a group. When they stare at the sky, they see constellations. When they look at the sea, they see the Cyclades. So when somebody chooses

to be alone, it is not understood. It is defined as somebody who hates something. The story of Timon – a citizen of Athens who renounced society – was not interpreted as him being lonely. Rather it was that he had to have hated people."

Timon isn't alone in his loneliness – Philoctetes, Echo and Narcissus and even Achilles all experience it in degrees. But one thing, Professor Chaniotis explains, runs true in all the stories told as lessons to the Greeks: "Loneliness is a punishment."

Fast forward to contemporary times and not a huge amount has changed. Loneliness, for all its statistical prevalence, is something still struggling to find ground in the Greek conscience. But it's everywhere, says Professor Chaniotis; from those who have left rural spaces due to a crumbling economy, and the families who once lived together that are now moving apart.

"You see it in the villages that have been abandoned, in the schools that are empty because parents have moved away in search of better prospects," he says. "The elderly are being left behind but so are the young people. There is an illusion of a community."

"Ultimately, there are three communities that experience loneliness the greatest in Greece: the ones left behind, the elderly; the ones who come here to build a life, the refugees; and the ones who leave Greece because of it, the Greek diaspora. Each of these groups experience a collective loneliness – people forming their own island in the community."

For those seeking refuge in Greece, there's a particular kind of loneliness that they experience; one that some argue is intentional. Fayad Mulla has witnessed this first hand. An activist and freelance journalist from Austria, he's spent the last year documenting something unusual happening on the Greek islands: refugees were disappearing.

And on 11 April 2023, he witnessed something shocking.

On Lesbos, Mulla watched as 12 refugees – parents and children – were bundled into a van by masked men. The van then drove down to the water where more masked men waited, alongside a vessel owned by the Greek Coastal Guard. The group were quickly herded in and then steered out to sea, before being dumped in the middle of the ocean in an inflatable raft; an act that violates both Greek and European law.

All of this was caught on tape by Mulla, who shared it with The New York Times whose staff then checked and verified the footage. They confirmed it was real.

Worse, Mulla says the masked individuals aren't just any group – he believes they're the Greek authorities. "I've seen these kidnappers working with the authorities to send people out on the raft. You can't call the police because they're already there. You can't call the coast guard because they're already there."

Greece has been under severe scrutiny for its handling of migrants arriving by sea, often leaving them on the water or pushing them back to Turkey, known as 'pushbacks'. But

Mulla's footage presents a brutal glimpse of a trend he says has been happening for a while – once that offers a different perspective on the idea of loneliness in the Aegean Sea.

"This is happening all the way from Lesbos down to Kos," he says. "And it's been going on for years. What's worse is that almost no refugee can swim. All of them have come from countries where they don't need to. It's traumatic for them."

"At the camp, it's like a prison. There is no noise. We're so alone"

To cap it all off, Mulla says the authorities know this, but that doesn't stop them from leaving refugees out to sea. "Once you're in the water they don't care. They'll let you die."

It's an experience multiple refugees have corroborated. And if you do survive or avoid the pushback, the fate on some islands is just as devastating.

That is the story Francis* has to tell; a teacher who fled Liberia for Europe

after rebel forces tried to recruit him. He ended up on the Greek island of Samos, the isle where legend says Aesop was imprisoned until he told his fables. Francis' tale is one of incarceration too yet it is anything but mythic. At its core, it's one of loneliness.

"I left one problem for another," explains the 27-year old, as he wanders down a beach in Samos; a moment of peace where he's not plagued by his reality. His journey to Greece took him through Turkey, multiple attempts to cross the water and almost cost him his life. It's been over a year since he left Liberia and almost six months spent living in one of Greece's new high-security access centres.

When news broke in 2020 of the dire conditions and the resulting fire refugees had to endure in the Moria camp on Lesbos, Greece – under international pressure – moved to change the way they housed refugees. Their solution came in the form of settlements dubbed Closed Controlled Access Centres (CCACs) – high-surveillance EU-funded facilities that promised safety and protection for refugees during the identification and asylum process. The reality is something different.

"On my journey here, I've been tortured. I've been dehumanised," says Francis. "My friend who I escaped with died in my arms. I came here to seek protection – instead I'm held hostage behind bars."

Advocacy groups in Greece agree. Ella Dodds is a project coordinator at I



Have Rights in Samos, an NGO supporting asylum seekers through the process while advocating against what they claim are human rights abuses on the island. She's watched 30 million euros being pumped into these facilities and says that the CCACs not only break EU law but are designed in a way to isolate and effectively erase any indication that refugees exist.

“When people arrive at these centres, they're held for 25 days in the same room before they're allowed anywhere else in the centre,” she says. The CCAC mimics incarceration. The architecture of surveillance is extreme. It's a prison.

“Twice a day, people need to present themselves to get food. If they miss this, they aren't fed. Inside, it's hostile. There are no trees, there's barbed wire. The isolation of this space, you can imagine what that does to somebody, especially vulnerable people; where around 25 per cent of them have received pushback and most of whom have experienced shipwreck or sexual assault.”

The isolation goes beyond inside the centres. Most of these CCACs are built at a great distance from towns where refugees can seek support from NGOs or simply buy food. Dodd says the cost of this is huge, both mentally and financially.

“The CCACs are far from anywhere,” she says. “In Samos, it would take an able-bodied person one

hour to walk from Samos town to the camp. If you're older or not in that physical condition, it's longer. Six months of the year it's too hot to walk so you need to take the bus which costs three euro sixty. This is massive for those who get a budget of about one euro a day.

“The location of the centres make it hugely challenging for refugees to build relationships. Before when they were in the towns, refugees mixed with tourists and you could sit down in a coffee shop and chat. Now, the CCACs

have eroded communities.”

Alimamy* is one of those refugees who has felt the claustrophobia of the CCACs. At 26, he left Sierra Leone for a better life. At 28, he's still not found it.

For two years, he's suffered imprisonment and multiple pushbacks to Turkey. And like Francis, loneliness and solitude are some of the only things he has ever known in Greece. “I'm very lonely and isolated,” he says. “At the camp, it's like a prison. There is no noise. We're so alone.”

He describes his first 25 days as some of the worst. The rooms themselves aren't bad but they're not private. When they're fed, it's with expired food. One harrowing recollection he shares is of frozen chicken that expired the previous year.

And he says you can't leave easily either. You're given curfews – if you miss one, you'll be locked out. “The authorities treat us like criminals. We're scanned in and out of the centre like prisoners,” says Alimamy. “I had a family. I was self-employed. It's so painful to think back to now.”

The mental fortitude required to endure these conditions is great, and for some too great. “A boy of 23 years old tried to kill himself the other day because he thought he'd be better off dead than in the camp,” explains Francis, who has taken on a pastoral role in the centre. “I saved him but people resort to this because they've been here for 10 months after having their

asylum application rejected.

“And what do you do then? We have done everything to alert the authorities of what we go through in here – we have written, peacefully protested. They hear our cries but they do nothing.”

The accounts here are a far cry from the triumph the Greek government and prime minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis present as their

“firm but fair” migration policy.

Mitsotakis has even publicly denied accusations that the CCAC's are inhumane; one heated exchange with a Dutch journalist comes to mind where he instead described

same money, people could be rehomed – and for a lot less.”

For both Alimamy and Francis, the wait to be granted asylum continues. Both have been in the Samos CCAC since the beginning of 2023, but there's still no news. “I came here in early February and I'm still waiting for a decision,” says Francis. “The camp is a cemetery, as quiet as a graveyard. It's a lonely place.

“The authorities tell us we won't find jobs but we have futures. That's what we came here for. All we can do is think of who we have left behind. We still come with the hope to one day put smiles back on their faces.”

On other islands, a different kind of loneliness and devastation is taking place.

Westwards in the Ionian sea, nature rules on Kefalonia. A rugged, earthy landscape, it's an island known for its natural beauty. But like many of the Greek islands, it can't escape the effects of climate change.

“For people in small villages it's a taboo to say you're lonely and sometimes they don't realise they're lonely because they can't recognise it”

In 2021, wildfires ravaged the island. Grass burned, villages were evacuated and homes were destroyed. One resident, Andreas Solomos, lost his. It left him not only without a home but a feeling that he was alone.

Loneliness is chameleonic in how it presents but one less-talked about trigger is environmental destruction. It's one that impacts the elderly in particular; the demographic most likely to have grown up with an environment that has since changed and those most likely to be at risk when devastation spreads.

The wildfires of the past few years in Greece have put this into perspective. The 2021 fires were one of the country's worst, destroying over 125,000 hectares of land, a direct consequence of rising global temperatures.

But for all climate change's physical devastation, it has a mental impact too.

the Samos facility as an “impeccable camp”.

The mental cost of staying in these centres endures long after any potential release. It's why institutions like I Have Rights and Samos Volunteers provide psychosocial support along the way, as well as advocating for more humane conditions. Dodd says it's increasingly challenging supporting those held in the CCACs but that it's a matter of human rights.

“Greece's current practice of handling migrants is invariant with EU law,” she explains. “Detention is a last resort and they create a legal fiction of identifying migrants. They don't call it detention because then they would need to safeguard human rights. Those held in the CCACs aren't granted the same rights.”

It's a costly method too; Greece has spent a quarter of a billion on asylum and integration, and millions on the centres themselves. “For that



Since we've started our programme, around 70 per cent of our beneficiaries have told us their lives have changed for the better."

Eleni Athanasiou is one of those people

whose life has changed for the better. At 67 years old, she's retired and spends time between Greece and Sweden where one of her children lives. In Athens though, her life has felt empty. "Before Prolepsis, my life was a little bit lonely, a little hard," she explains. "Because I didn't have company."

She joined the programme a year ago and since then has met two "wonderful ladies" who she speaks to regularly and visits. "I have friends now. I feel very glad and well," she says. "There is good work being done at Prolepsis. They try to bring joy. We

need programmes like this – my life is better for it."

"I have friends now. I feel very glad and well"

For some though, it's going to take a little longer to work through the loneliness and the loss. Even two years later, Mr Samolos won't talk about the wildfires.

Back in Avlida, the sunshine and shadow begin mingling in Georgia's home. It's poetic that of all the places Georgia chose to move to after Kythira, it was Avlida, or Aulis as it was once known. This is a place with a battled history when it comes to feeling stranded and alone.

As told in Homer's Iliad, it was the port at which King Agamemnon's army attempted to set sail for Troy, only to find themselves stranded when the wind died. The story goes that the goddess of the wilderness, Artemis, needed to be appeased for a crime King Agamemnon committed and only the sacrifice of a virgin would do. So Agamemnon brought his daughter to Aulis, under the premise she would make a match for Achilles. Instead, he cut her

throat in front of his army.

It's a savage tale of sacrifice as far as escaping Greece goes and a lesson in things that stay with us, long after they're gone.

Georgia's leaving Avlida too. In some ways, she's giving up her life – not her physical one, rather her life in Greece; a country still learning to recognise the existence of loneliness.

Greece isn't alone in combating loneliness but it does provide Europe with grounds to find out how it can cope with it too. From psychologists to community programmes, the biggest challenge arguably lies in overcoming the shame of loneliness. In fact, the EU's June 2023 report on loneliness pinpoints that tackling loneliness and creating policies to mitigate it begins with the very problem Greece highlights: the awareness and stigma surrounding loneliness.

Part of that is demystifying where to look for a solution and understanding this is a public health issue, not simply an individual one.



73 per cent of those surveyed in the report believed that it was family that should play the greatest role in solving this – even when the notion of family is a tenuous one in an increasingly globalised world that is forcing them to splinter. And come October 2023, the EU is welcoming policy recommendations for handling the socio-economic impact of loneliness in Europe, a move that highlights the magnitude threat they believe it represents.

Still, for Georgia, something has to change. Even now, she can't quite escape the loneliness. And she believes that as long as she's in Greece, it will be part of her life.

"I'm moving to Australia now," she says softly, the last of the daylight petering out behind her. "With my job and my breakup, it's been a perfect storm. I don't think I'm at peace with loneliness but I think I can be ok knowing that maybe in the future, I won't be at the extremes of it anymore."