

Commencement Time for Greece

1. Introduction: From boom to bust

The recent Greek debt crisis came as a surprise. For 13 consecutive years from 1996 to 2008, Greece went through a growth miracle, with economic activity rising faster than in the rest of Europe. The Greek relative standard of living gradually improved from three quarters of the average EU-15 living standard in 1996 to nine tenths in 2008. This miracle finished abruptly at the end of 2008 and now the country seems to have entered a new era of contraction.

The article begins by exploring the economic history of recent years in order to shed light on the causes of the crisis. Subsequently, it assesses the Greek stabilization program and its chances of success.

2. The golden years leading up to EMU membership

The earlier rapid growth was no accident. Its roots can be traced to the determined efforts of the Simitis center-left governments to ensure Greece would satisfy the Maastricht criteria and become a member of the Euro Area. Thus, in the second half of the 1990s, Greece managed to bring down its double digit rate of inflation and fiscal deficits and control its rising public debt-to-GDP ratio. The subsequent decline in market interest rates and the renewed business confidence and euphoria about the new stable EMU regime brought a huge expansion in private investment spending, increased household borrowing, and expanded consumption and growth. As a member of the Euro Area, Greece enjoyed relative macroeconomic stability with low inflation, a stable currency and a fiscal policy constrained by the Stability & Growth Pact.

3. Failure to reform planted the seeds of today's mess

Joining the Euro Area opened the country up to new challenges. Greece had to be able to compete internationally without the macroeconomic tools of interest rates and exchange rates. It had to create an efficient, flexible and transparent economy, eradicate public waste, minimize bureaucracy, grab the rampant tax evasion, rationalize its pension system and open up its product markets to competition, away from the oligopolistic practices of a few interest groups. Yet, structural reforms interfered with a mosaic of interest groups or the life style of the population. They proved hard to carry through and required not only political will but strong parliamentary majority by the governing party. When the Simitis government tried to rationalize the pension system in 2001, labor unions objected – to what by today's standards was a minor reform - and brought one million people, or 1/10th of the population, in demonstrations around Athens. Given its thin majority in Parliament, the government backed away.

The subsequent center-right Karamanlis government won a landslide victory in March 2004 on the agenda of reforms, but puzzlingly, it failed to accomplish its pre-electron reform agenda despite its large majority in parliament. The Greek inflation ran consistently higher than the Euro Area average inflation and the country's global competitiveness rankings sank while the current account reached historically unprecedented deficit levels. Then, in September 2007, things got much worse. The governmental majority in Parliament thinned out and the second Karamanlis government went on a spending spree, effectively abandoning fiscal prudence. Fiscal expenditure as a percentage of the size of the economy rose to historically high levels, 5 percentage points above the historical average of the previous 25 years.

4. The international crisis uncovered the earlier collapse of fiscal discipline

The global recession brought a mild recession to Greece in 2009. This was the first recession in 16 years. The recession, although mild, exacerbated the fiscal deficit a lot more than in other EMU countries thanks to fiscal laxity. The huge deficit became apparent in the last quarter of 2009 when a new government came to power. This is when the three major international rating agencies blew the whistle. They downgraded Greece and claimed the future path of the Greek debt could easily get out of control due to the shrinking economy and a lack of fiscal discipline. The debt – to-GDP ratio, which for a decade was kept at around 100%, was now in an explosive upward path.

Financial markets woke up to the red flag of the rating agencies and became nervous, fearing that a shrinking economy could not easily generate the tax revenues required to pay the promised interest and capital to Greek Government Bond holders. In early 2010, the markets eventually refused to lend the Greek State more money to finance its needs. Greek banks, although healthy and profitable and with a strong capital base, suddenly could not borrow from the international interbank market either. The fear for the Greek State transformed into a fear for all Greek counterparties. Greek banks turned to the ECB for liquidity support.

By April 2010, the Greek State had no way out but default and create a depression within the country and a contagion in Europe, heralding the possible unraveling of the Euro Area. The Greek problem became an EMU problem as many EMU banks held a large portion of Greek government bonds in their portfolios and as market fears transcended the Greek boundaries into other Southern European countries.

Then, in early May, EMU members came to the rescue together with the IMF with a financial package of €110 bn loan, and with an interest rate on the EMU portion of the loan which is not cheap: It is set at least 3 percentage points above the borrowing rates of the contributing EMU members. The loan is given in installments and is accompanied by strict and sequential conditions of a time table of reforms for the stabilization of the economy. Thanks to the loan, Greece

does not need to borrow from the open market for about 2.5 years. Thus it gained a time window to enable it to fix its public sector problems and bring its economy back to health.

5. Greek society is awakening to the need for discipline

It will not be easy to get the fiscal mess under control. Neither will it be easy to regain credibility among the European partners and the financial markets. Yet, we should not overlook the remarkable transformation taking place in Greek society today. When Prime Minister George Papandreou addressed the nation right after the February Economic Policy Forum meetings in Davos, Switzerland and talked about a wage freeze and a rise in gasoline taxes, 2 out of 3 Greeks reacted positively! This is a higher percentage than the people who voted for him back in October 2009.

This support for austerity and control of public finances continues to the present, even after most Greeks already felt the decline in their disposable incomes, as their Easter bonus was reduced or cut. Apparently, the average Greek understands very well the deep hole the country is in and is genuinely thirsty for a good manager-politician to put order in public life. People seem to be fed up of years of waste, tax evasion, public sector inefficiencies and an economic system that does not always reward hard work and law abiding behavior. This is why the demonstrations to a very drastic pension reform only drew one twentieth the size of demonstrators relative to the 2001 incident.

6. Fiscal consolidation has begun

The expected fiscal consolidation is drastic. The measures are more ambitious than the expected reduction in the fiscal deficit, leaving room for slippage. So far, in the first half of the year, the government is within its annual budget targets, having slashed the central government fiscal deficit by over 40%.

On the expenditure side the task is easier: It is straightforward to legislate reductions in expenditures and carry them on. And the government has done it. It has cut the 13th and 14th salaries of public employees and pensioners as well as many other pecuniary incomes. The 2010 nominal wage and pension bill in the new central government budget is 15% less in 2009! In some professions, like university professors, the salary reduction is 30%!

On the expenditure side, there is additional enormous room for cost reductions, which do not affect the services provided by the public sector. A major source of waste is the National Health System, the local governments and wider public sector enterprises. Many concrete steps are taken to address the problem, including outsourcing to international auditing firms the auditing of large hospitals and enterprises, minimizing the number of prefectures at the local government level, or instituting a tighter control of budgets through the Single Payment Authority at the Ministry of Finance.

On the revenue side, it is much harder to collect taxes. Real estate tax rates increased and VAT tax rates increased as well, from 19% to 23%. The first leg of the VAT increase took place in mid March and the second leg on July 1st. Revenues are not expected to increase one for one with the increase in tax rates, but the net result is positive so far and is better over time.

7. Hidden cushions

There are two hidden cushions on the revenue side: First, a new tax law has the ability to grab a lot of the unreported income by the self-employed. These guys represent 36% of the labor force but only contribute 4% of the personal income tax! Starting in 2011, their life style – which is computerized and known to authorities - will determine a minimum imputed income and thus a minimum tax, no matter what they claim.

Second, a lot of the underreporting of the VAT by businesses is being captured by the demand of citizens for purchase receipts. A “tax revolution” is currently taking place thanks to a smart decision by the government to tell citizens to submit purchase receipts if they want to be eligible for tax exemption of the first €12 thousand of personal income they earn. Thus enterprises are forced to reveal more of their true revenues and stop cheating on the VAT. As a by product, some of the underground economy gets recorded.

8. Radical structural reforms

The government began tackling the most difficult reforms first in order to avoid a possible reform fatigue by the population. It has already passed the appropriate legislation. The pension reform is expected to save 10 percentage points of GDP per annum in state pension expenditures over the next 50 years! The new pension law puts Greece right at the EMU average in terms of the future increase in state pension liabilities. No more loopholes in the retirement age of 65, a floor which is going to be adjusted upward in the future according to life expectancy. No more early retirement before the age of 60 and at a bigger penalty than before. The size of pensions will now be made a function of life time contributions and the minimum contributory period for retirement is going up to 40 years from the original 37.

Labor reforms are also drastic, aiming at increasing flexibility and employment in the labor market. The minimum wage of new entrants in the labor force is being reduced by 20%. Central bargaining is made more balanced and provisions are included for local contracts in areas of high unemployment which give the ability to set wages at levels below the minimum. The minimum threshold for activating rules on collective monthly dismissals from medium size companies is raised from the current 2% to 5%. The use of temporary contracts and part-time work is facilitated. Variable pay is allowed more freely in order to link wages to productivity performance at the firm level.

The government is also expediting product market reforms, way ahead of schedule. The aim is to liberalize markets and tackle the unjustified privileges of special interest groups like truck drivers, notary public officials, lawyers, pharmacists, etc. They are expected to unleash product and service market competition, improve efficiency and GDP growth by a substantial margin. Breaking up the various oligopolistic structures will also allow the rate of domestic inflation to fall to the Euro Area average. This is largely an unfinished business, as was revealed by the recent full pass through of the VAT increase to domestic CPI inflation. Privatizations are also on the agenda, but for the moment the plan is not very aggressive. I expect them to gain priority in the Fall, once policies to promote growth will dominate the political agenda.

9. When and how can the recession end?

Reducing fiscal deficits to close to zero is not enough to guarantee success of the consolidation program. As long as deficits exist, they add to the previous nominal debt. And as long as the economy shrinks, the size of that nominal debt becomes larger relative to the size of the economy. Greece' fiscal problem is also a growth problem. Markets will stop worrying about the possibility of a sovereign default only when growth comes back strongly enough to stabilize the debt – to –GDP ratio and subsequently shrink it.

The drastic cut in public sector wages and pensions and the freeze in private sector wages reduce consumption, particularly the demand for large ticket items like consumer durables: Cars, furniture, electronic gadgets. This has a drastic effect on domestic output and an even bigger effect on imports, since most durables are imported. Consumer confidence is on a free fall and the business climate depressed. Private sector investment keeps shrinking for 11 consecutive quarters and the real estate market is frozen with housing prices declining. Unemployment is rising and is already at 12%.

I expect the recession to continue for at least another 9 months before the economy stabilizes in the second half of 2011. Year 2012 will be the first year that the Greek economy can realistically be expected to register positive growth. This is a good scenario leading to rising subsequent output and to the possibility that by year 2015 the Greek standard of living can catch up to the level of 2008, the year before the recession started. Thus if everything works well, Greeks would only "lose" seven years of growth.

The factors that may drive the economy out of recession are net exports and investment. Exports are rising thanks to world growth, the fall in real wages and the decline in the value of the Euro. Imports are declining fast, already by 14% in 2009 and possibly another 20% cumulatively over 2010-11. Investment can reverse its decline the moment the economic climate stabilizes and the new government pushes with its projects, absorbs available EU funds and, mainly, manages to attract private capital in smart ways through Public –Private-Partnerships, Build-Operate-Transfer schemes or long term leases of public property. There is a lot of Greek private money staying idle in Greek or foreign banks, waiting for profitable opportunities and a more friendly business climate. The Greek private sector is not levered and should not be confused with the public sector.

Having established fiscal discipline in its regular work routine, I expect the government to soon switch its attention to the question of how to jump-start the economy. The economy can only reverse gears if the public sector abandons its capricious and arbitrary behavior towards the healthy parts of the private sector and complements them instead of punishing them with bureaucratic or other obstacles. A better organized public sector could have this ability soon. In the mean time, one should not be surprised to see special tax or other investment incentives to occupy the political agenda over the next six months.

10. Can long term growth come back?

Moving beyond the medium term prospects of the Greek economy, the most important parameter for the success of the stabilization effort is the long-term ability of the economy to generate income and wealth. Long term growth will be driven mainly by gains in productivity and competitiveness. Average annual productivity growth in 2000-2009 was three times larger than the corresponding growth in Germany, Spain or Portugal. A similar performance coupled with competitiveness gains is not out of reach in the future.

Long-term growth can originate from a variety of sources. First, the capital intensity of the Greek economy remains below the Euro Area average, allowing room for a further future boost in investment activity. Second, the real wage decline will erase all previous competitiveness losses. This together with the decrease in the value of the Euro can boost the export sector for a long time. Third, structural reforms can bring enormous efficiency gains as transparency and a level playing field will dominate all economic relationships and as the inefficient parts of the public sector shrink. Last but not least, capturing the underground economy, apart from its obvious benefits to revenue generation, will also lead to an upward revision in the GDP statistics. This would reveal that the size of nominal debt is not as onerous and unsustainable as it appears on paper today.

11. Conclusion

The Greek crisis is not the beginning of the end for its citizens, but represents a new beginning. Today it is commencement time for the Greek economy. The risks are high and should not be discounted but the challenges are not overwhelming. The crisis and the EU/IMF watchful eye push the nation to finally come to grips with its long neglected structural problems and solve them by building consensus. Greece has the ability to be successful because it is a country with a strong and unlevered private sector and is populated by a majority a hard working individuals who like to

28/7/2010

excel. Yet, it also happens to be a country with an inefficient, disorganized and wasteful public sector, whose arbitrary and sluggish behavior over time has created a culture of corruption and disobedience. Today, Greek society has matured to realize those inadequacies and is thirsty for a new beginning. The country is lucky in its misfortune, since the crisis happened to occur right after general elections. Thus the new government has the political power to implement the required reforms plus it has the space of time in office, which allows it to be present in the future to begin reaping the rewards of that effort.