



Written by [Bruce Walker](#) on August 25, 2011

Rural Greece Falls Back on Self-Reliance

Roger Jinkinson is a British writer, and he lives in a remote Greek village on the island of Karpathos (left). Although the village is not immune to the meltdown of the Greek economy caused by a huge problem with sovereign debt creditworthiness, simmering most furiously in the ancient capital of Athens, 400 kilometers away, the small village has found its own way to survive the crisis.



The fundamentals of the Karpathos economy are straightforward: frugality and thrift that would perplex more cosmopolitan Europeans, hard work in labor that is practical and productive, and the replacement of a government fiat-money economy with a barter economy. Another factor has helped this rural economy work. Young Greeks, depressed by the collapsing system based upon an irresponsible government, are drifting back to places such as Karpathos, where life is not easy, but it is firmly grounded in the fundamentals of life.

Some of the older Greeks in this village either remember the mass starvation in the Second World War and the following years of the Greek Civil War, or they have been reminded of these very hard times by older family members. Greek women here make cheeses that can last for up to three years, which is money in the (food) bank. Wheat and barley are cultivated by hand, reaped, ground, kneaded, and baked. The Greek women of the village take charge of this bread and because they know firsthand the labor required to make it. Not one bit of the bread is wasted.

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The government is much less important in these villages than the two social institutions which bind the villagers together: family and the Greek Orthodox Church. The myth of secular collectivists that without a nanny-state there is no social safety net is exposed in Karpathos. Family members get up early and go to bed late scratching grain, vegetables, and fish for their livelihood. The church, impelled as all Christian churches are, to charity for the truly in need, helps as well.

That aspect of American frontier character often called “neighborliness” blossoms in this village where everyone knows everyone else. Without bureaucrats or laws, social customs, human decency and common sense lead to an efficient sharing of goods, just as an American would borrow a lawn mower or six eggs from a neighbor, without keeping a book of the transactions. Aside from just sharing, bartering goods and services—which never vanished in villages such as this—becomes a powerful lubricant of economic activity when people lose faith in government-fiat money.



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What makes the survival and relative success of villages such as this more remarkable is that it has received a triple whammy from the economy. First, the Greek government is presiding over a debt crisis in which the debt is winning the battle. Second, Diaspora remittances — money sent back to the home village by Greeks working in lands like America — have dried up dramatically as the economies of those nations contract too. Third, tourists, drawn to the natural beauty of the myriad Aegean islands like Karpathos, are much less common than in more prosperous times.

These tough Greeks have also learned over the years to deal with disaster. The sea, though beautiful, is often dangerous and turbulent. The land yields its fruits, but only with much labor. This is in a region in which earthquakes and even volcanoes are not unknown. Villagers like those on Karpathos learn to survive without outside help.

Although the slow collapse of the Greek national economy is not good news for these villagers, they are heartened by a return of their children and grandchildren. The demographic trend in Karpathos, like in most rural areas of the western world, has been depopulation as the allure of most interesting jobs in big cities left the villages growing increasingly gray. This demographic reversal is increased by native Athenians, who see little hope in the metropolis of Greece, seeking to move into the countryside — some estimates place the migration in the thousands.

Beyond just economics is also real religious faith in villages such as this. The cynical, secular city masses may view Christianity as the opiate of the masses, but the tough, practical, diligent villagers of Karpathos see Christianity as a very real and vibrant force. Among these islands and cities, 2,000 years ago, men such as Paul of Taurus once traveled and preached. Martyrs died when the Ottomans overwhelmed the Balkans. Life here has always been hard, but it has never been hopeless. As is so often the case, the tough pious folk fishing the sea or tending the gardens and vineyards or grinding the grain, provide bedrock against the meanest ambitions of statist.



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