



Graffiti artist Bleeps.GR at work in Athens, where young people are mobilising to protest at austerity measures. Photograph: Sean Smith for the Guardian

You're a young European failing to get a job in a country buffeted by the worst economic turbulence in decades. After a hard day of rejections and no-replies, how do you switch off? Well, in [Greece](#) the chances are that you settle down to watch a sitcom about other young Greeks failing to get a job.

To non-Greek speakers, *The 592-euro Generation* looks like any other slick, glossy TV comedy: quick editing, smooth-skinned cast, and a rock soundtrack of commercially-acceptable spikiness. Yet the gags aren't quite Chandler and Joey material. There's the title for a start: a reference to the monthly minimum wage of €592 (£516) earned by those under 25.

"How do you know you're part of the €592 generation?" runs a trailer.

"When you go to the unemployment office and you know all the staff by their first name," says one character. Another, an American-trained lawyer, replies: "When you've studied at Harvard; and back in Greece your job is to serve tea to the people who serve coffee."

The genre marked "situation comedies about economic indicators" is hardly a bulging one, and plenty of other topics get the one-liner treatment. But the lack of a steady income is a constant theme: when the characters go to a bar it's clear they can only afford one drink; a meter stays on-screen in one episode, ticking away as the account balances dwindle to nothing.

Even romantic mishaps – that staple of sitcoms – do not escape the lack-of-cash nexus. "Job-hunting is like searching for a boyfriend," sighs a young woman. "You show them your best side and they still don't call you back."

When the show launched in October on Greece's answer to ITV, it ran at primetime and was chalked up as a hit, especially for a cast of unknowns. But it was among the target group of 14- to 24-year-olds that the series hit a bullseye: up to 60% of them tuned in.

This being his first TV job, scriptwriter Lambros Fisfis clung to the safety of a subject he knew well. "I wanted to write about our generation," says the 28-year-old. "And this was the closest I could get to reality without making a drama or a tragedy."

But didn't he ever question the likely success of a comedy about life on the minimum wage? Fisfis tells a funny story. The original title for the show was Generation €700 – because that was then the official bottom rate. Then, "about three to four weeks before we went on air", the government cut the going rate for young workers, ostensibly to give them a fighting chance of employment in an economy sinking further into the recessionary quicksand. Cue hurried changes in title sequences and scripts. "It was the running gag on set: 'Maybe next month we'll be called the €300 Generation.'"

The series finished not with a happy ending but an uncertain one: the entire cast left Greece, either for England or Cyprus or just taking off on a round-the-world trip. "I didn't want to write that, but the biggest export of Greece right now is its people," says Fisfis.

The media often amplifies real life, but Fisfis insists he did the opposite: manicuring the reality of being young in a country where nearly 40% of people between 16 and 24 are out of work (the equivalent in the UK is 20%).

Visiting Exarchia, Athens' more agreeable version of London's Camden Town, it becomes clear that he is right.

Upstairs in a bar on the main square are four young middle-class men, all with degrees from top universities, all fluent in English – and all struggling to get their lives out of first gear.

Worst off is Dimitris: 27 years old, with a master's in management, and an instinctive politeness. He finished studying in 2009 – Year Zero of the Greek crisis – and after two years has just begun his first proper job. For the past three months he has worked six hours a day in a call centre, cold-calling mobile phone users and trying to persuade them to switch providers.

He says the job has three main problems: it's a three-hour round trip from his home; the take-home pay is only €30 a day, and he's on a monthly contract ("Every month I have to sign a new piece of paper and say, 'Thank you for letting me work in this magnificent place!'").

There's a fourth problem: he's way over-qualified. Then again, Dimitris reckons about a third of his colleagues have at least a bachelor's degree.

"Back when we were undergraduates we used to joke: 'It'll be okay, we can become bank clerks. It's not ideal, but we'll get €20,000 a year.'" So what happened? His brother Andreas replies: "In 2009 all those jobs went away."

Having just landed an auditing job at the accounting firm PWC, Andreas is the luckiest of the bunch – and he knows it: "There were 2,800 applicants for 28 places." But even his fortune is limited: after taxes, his salary comes in at €14,000 which leaves a monthly budget of €150 for going out. That amounts to "two coffees with friends; two cafes with the girlfriend; and cigarettes". And certainly no chance of getting his own place. In their late 20s, Dimitris and Andreas share a bedroom at home.

Then there's Marios, who is a trained economist but is about to head back to college for a

master's in accountancy. "At 27, I don't want to study any more; I want to start my life," he says. Even when these graduates do get work, they often don't get paid: Marios worked for seven months at an accountant's, and the firm didn't pay him a euro.

The argument ended with the employers telling Marios to go and work elsewhere. "They said, 'Another company might have money to pay you.'"

As they sit sipping their iced coffees and tugging on roll-ups ("they're cheaper than real cigarettes"), they list all the places they have thought of going instead. Marios mentions the offers he got from universities in Leicester, Surrey and Cardiff.

Panos is off to Sweden. "It doesn't make for a happy culture, all this migration," says Andreas. "Families are split up." Then Dimitris, his brother from the call centre, rebuts him: "I would love to leave."

Lois Labrianidis does not seem surprised by the scene. An economic geographer at the University of Macedonia, he says Greece turns out a higher proportion of graduates than the European average. And in some disciplines the record is even stronger: put against the size of its population, Greece produces the second-highest number of doctors in the world.

"You have a high number of graduates produced for a useless private sector," he says. "The majority of businesses and entrepreneurs behave as if they're in a developing country and can hire relatively cheap labour."

Greece has long sent its economically-active overseas – just ask the American producers of My Big Fat Greek Wedding. But where in the 1960s and 1970s it was largely uneducated manual labour going abroad, now it is the graduates. In other words, Greece used to export its hands, now in a trend exacerbated by the crisis, it is exporting its brains.

What Labrianidis is analysing is a social contract – you get the grades, we give you the jobs – that has broken. One response by young Greeks is to leave; another is to protest.

What marked out this summer's demonstrations in Athens' Syntagma Square and across the country was the high-proportion of [young people](#) : hyper-educated, under-employed and radicalised.

In Britain, some of them go by the name of UK Uncut; in Spain as the Indignados; and in Greece as the Aganaktismenoi, or Frustrated. In each case, it's this class – the young, with a sense of being cheated out of a decent future – combined with public-sector workers facing job losses and drops in salaries and pensions, who combine into the most interesting political force.

Go to Syntagma Square now, and the main human activity is immigrants selling knock-off handbags. But the protesters of summer already have a date they'll be back en masse (on 3 September) and are working on propaganda.

Over souvlaki near the Athenian market in Monistiraki, George, Dimitris and Foula tell me what they want.

Quoting the Aganaktismenoi slogan of "we don't want decisions to be made for us without us", they lay into the mainstream politicians.

They are more earnestly leftwing than the would-be leavers: they quote Bakunin and argue about Naomi Klein. What unites them is a sense of being locked out of their own lives.

Pointing at the other young Greeks, Dimitris says: "These are the finest minds of our generation, and they are filling cars with gas and serving coffees." And he swears that he will fight to change things. A few minutes later, he asks where would be better to study: Preston or Sheffield.

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