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THE VOICE OF THE
INTERNATIONAL
MOVING INDUSTRY

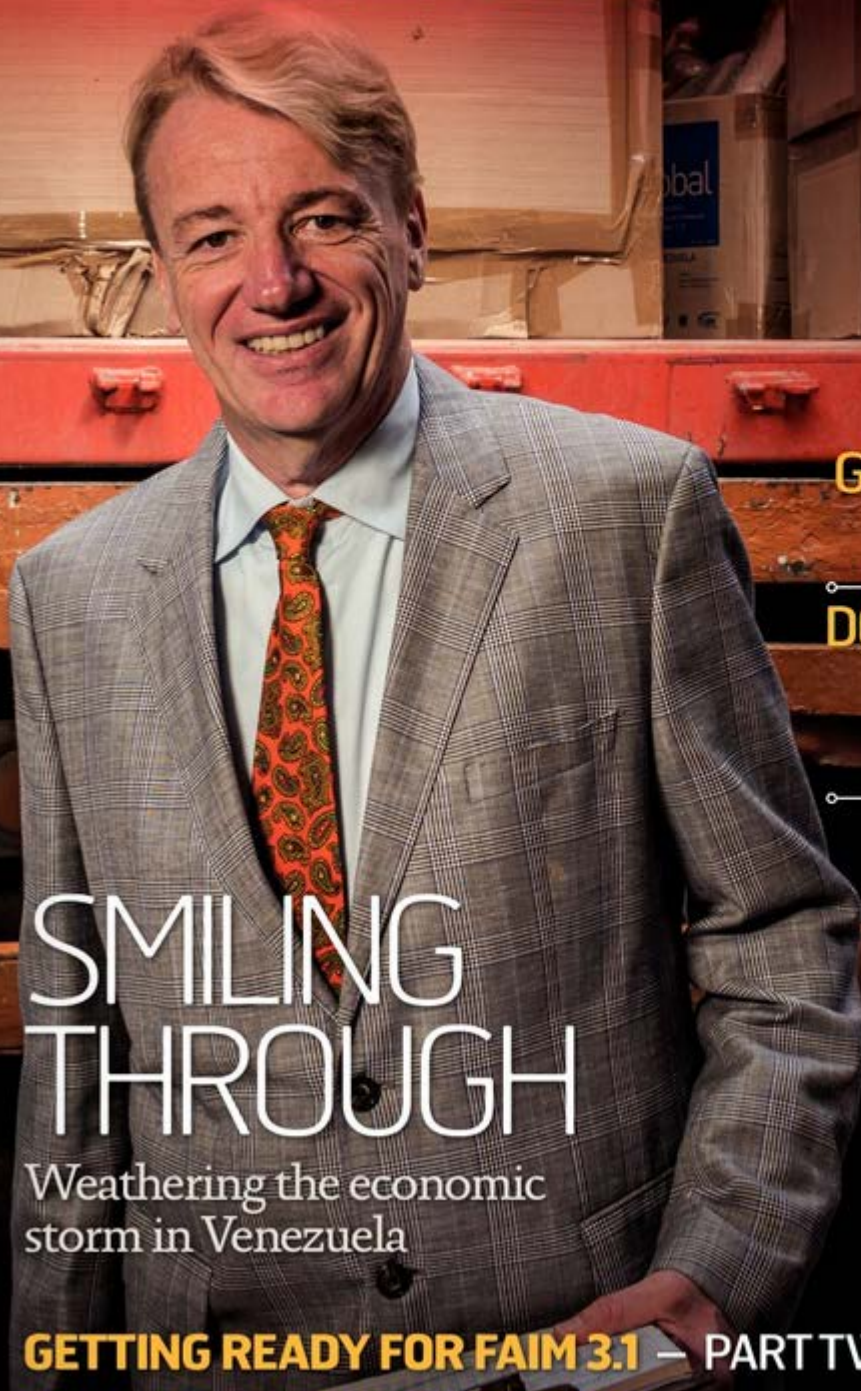
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Gifts of the Greeks

In 2013, when the FIDI Conference was held in Athens, Greece had stabilised, but was still suffering from the effects of the great recession. Since the snap election in January, however, the country has again been subjected to economic hardship. What talents do the country's international movers have to fall back on during the renewed crisis? By **Rob Coston**

Greece endured a turbulent 20th century: occupied by invading armies; embroiled in a bloody civil war; and caught in the grip of a military junta. Given its recent history, it is no surprise that modern Greeks embraced the European project, and the country enjoyed years of prosperity as a result.

But the economic crisis that began seven years ago brought dark days back to the sun-washed Mediterranean country. At the time of writing, Greece was suspended over an abyss. Another deadline looms, as the government must once again find millions of dollars to repay the hated 'Troika' – the European Central Bank, International Monetary Fund and European Union.

DEBT TROUBLE

These international creditors have spent the last five months demanding that Greece's left-wing government agree to further harsh austerity measures in return for €7.2bn in bailout money. Whatever the government's decision, the consequences for Greece and the world could be drastic.

What do international movers think of the situation? Have their opinions changed since the FIDI Conference was held in Athens?

'In 2013, Greece was already dipping into crisis,' says Kathy Chrisovergis, managing director of Celebrity International Movers. 'We were constantly being bombarded with messages from the media, saying "Greece will go bankrupt" and "Greece has no money".'

We were holding our breath and waiting to see what would happen, hoping for the best but fearing the worst.'

'The situation is completely different today (compared with 2013). Sometimes it seems like being in another country. We are going through a very difficult situation and it keeps deteriorating,' said Georgia Kasimati, manager of Athens-based Attica Movers.

The crisis had a serious effect on the moving industry in Greece, with a number of companies going into liquidation. Those that were not operating in a professional manner were especially vulnerable, as were firms heavily reliant on the Greek government for business.

Chrisovergis is adamant that the FIDI Conference gave her company a real boost in that difficult time: 'My advisers were saying "Don't spend money on the conference, it's not the right time." We took the opposite approach, and I'm happy that we did. Having the conference in Athens turned out to be very positive for our company and it was a good opportunity to let people know that Celebrity is here.'

'We also felt the strong support of our global moving industry and the FIDI family. In rough times, it was good to know that there was a network of companies just like us. It was useful both business-wise and in terms of psychological support. At the end of the day, it helped us to keep our spirits high.'

She added: 'It was also great for our country since



so many FIDI attendees had the opportunity to see this truly lovely country and invest in our tourism!

RENEWED STRUGGLE

Orphee Beinoglou, of Orphee Beinoglou International Forwarders, a former FIDI president, remembers 2013 as a good year compared with 2015. 'It was much better in 2013 than it is today, for sure. Unfortunately, with the new government lots of investment we have has almost stopped or is in 'standby mode'. This means there are fewer moves, and fewer foreigners coming and going. Unfortunately, the current uncertainty is also keeping us on standby - I don't want to make any investment at the moment because it's so difficult to tell whether it would be a good decision or a bad decision.

'The country can't carry on any longer with this uncertainty. We have reached our limits. I think that unless something happens very quickly, Greece will be in deep trouble.'

Kathy identifies the media at home and abroad as a major problem: 'I think psychology is the most important thing in finishing this crisis, and the media are constantly using scare tactics. It's like if people say to you "Oh my gosh, you look so pale!" over and over. At the end of a whole day of hearing that you're going to feel sick!'

Greek movers are therefore dealing with trust issues stemming from the financial uncertainty, as Orphee Beinoglou observes: 'We had a situation four years ago when there were fears Greece would get out of the euro and relaunch the drachma, and colleagues from abroad began asking us for prepayment before shipping. Today, most import companies in Greece are again being asked to pay before shipment.'

It hasn't all been bad, though. As with their Italian counterparts, Greek movers experienced a boost last year as companies downsized to smaller or cheaper offices and people moved out of the country. 'Last year was a record year for us, with very good profit, because of so many people moving away,' says Beinoglou. 'Of course, that doesn't mean next year will be the same.'

He explains how the flow of people has changed in

'The country can't carry on any longer with this uncertainty. We have reached our limits'

recent times: 'Those leaving are mostly well-educated Greeks that have lost their jobs. They are looking for work in countries like Canada, Australia, the UK and the rest of Europe. As a result, we have seen people going to destinations that we haven't often shipped to before.'

Attica's Kasimati, however, finds more individual clients are reluctant to move abroad and 'if they have to do so, they always ask for a better price; a more economical offer.'

'They reduce costs by avoiding some services, such as, trying to skip paying for insuring their personal effects; they avoid destination services, especially when they have to pay from their own budget.'

SURVIVAL

It's important to adapt in order to survive in tough times. 'In today's changing world you have to diversify and "swim with the current",' says Chrisovergis. 'That's what we've been trying to do. Swimming hard is tiring, but we are surviving and I am quite happy with the results we had last year. We offer a good product and have managed to increase our staff without decreasing salaries.'

'In general, my philosophy is to "Keep Calm and Carry On"! We continue to invest in our team, measure everything we do and constantly search for better deals.'

'For example, we purchased trucks that run throughout Europe, which has reduced our tremendous third-party costs and provided assured quality that has helped us survive.'

At Attica, Kasimati explains, changes have included those to operational efficiency: 'We try to make more economical use of our packing materials, but not at the expense of the quality... and organise things more strictly than before.'

The company has so far avoided cutting wages. 'We have not made lay-offs and redundancies, because most of the employees have worked for us for many years and are considered part of the company and the family.'

Just being a member of FIDI can also be a major

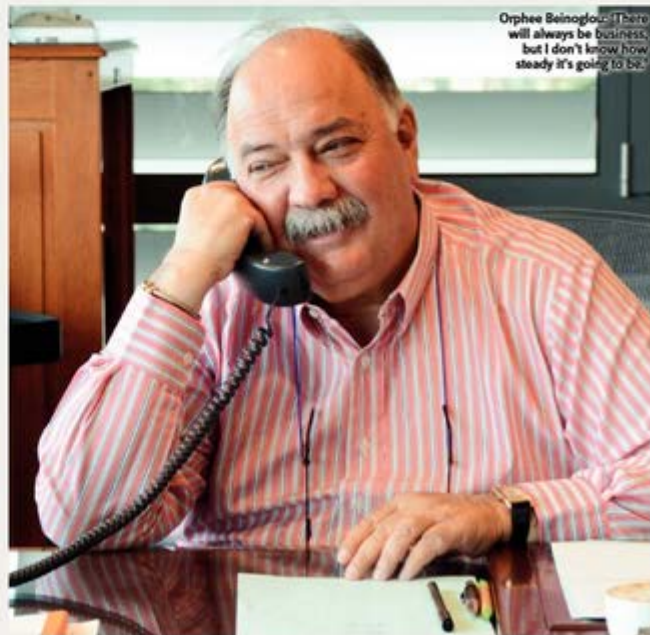
CONTINUES OVER



Attica Movers' manager Georgia Kasimati hopes for the future



One of Celebrity's European network trucks



Orphee Beinoglou: 'There will always be business, but I don't know how steady it's going to be.'



Kathy Chrisovergis, CEO of
Celebrity International Movers



advantage, as Orphee Beinoglou observes. 'FIDI gives you a steady flow of business on a worldwide basis, and security in some way. No matter what country you represent, you are accredited and can do business well and without having to pre-pay.'

Kathy also believes being part of FIDI has helped: 'I do feel it's a big advantage to be a member. People outside of Greece are now wary of Greek businesses and the credibility of our business owners, but when dealing with us they know they will have good service, and won't lose money thanks to the (FIDI) Payment Protection Plan. Our market doesn't have room now for people who are not professional. Movers that have the quality and credibility are the ones that will survive the crisis.'

Of course, adapting to the situation is also necessary. Orphee Beinoglou International Forwarders was already diversified into a number of areas, including logistics, so efficiencies were the way to go: 'You learn in difficult situations, and as a matter of fact you wonder why you didn't make changes before, when things were great. All that time you were wasting money on unnecessary things and didn't try to save on them,' says Beinoglou.

'You learn every day. I have been in this business for 42 years, and this is a new experience.'

What worries Attica is the growth of 'freelance' moving contractors, often using a single truck, no proper packing materials and employing family members and friends, especially for domestic moves. Often, such 'freelancers' may employ uninsured foreign workers without permits, too.

'You have to understand that is very bad for business as, despite their low costs, they cannot offer a good level of service. They create a very bad image for the moving industry,' says Kasimati.'

UNCERTAIN FUTURE

'I hope times won't get any worse than they are today,' says Beinoglou. 'I'm generally an optimist, but I'm pessimistic about this because of the way the negotiations are dragging on and on.'

'It was good to know that there was a network of companies just like us. It helped us to keep our spirits high'

Fortunately, international movers are in a better position to weather financial storms than some industries: 'There will always be moves, even if a country is bankrupt. Then more people will start going in because they want to take advantage of low prices and investment opportunities. There will always be business, but I don't know how steady it's going to be.'

Chrisovergis adds: 'At the end of the day our industry is very lucky, globally. We're not affected as badly as some. Unless someone invents teleportation, we movers will always be around!'

The news from Greece is not all doom and gloom, she says: 'I also see another interesting development: a lot of new Greek companies emerging that are making their mark in the global market. There are some new, bright ideas coming out of Greece. Now people are in need, they really improvise to find ways to survive and new products and marketing are going out to the world.'

'In the 29 years Celebrity has been in business we haven't had many Greek accounts, but that's changing. Companies from this country, like Folli Follie, Intralot and Cocomat, are putting their feet in the global market and generating business for us. There are a lot of promising signs.'

'Nobody ever wants to say "My country is gone",' says Beinoglou. 'We always hope that, at the last moment, things will work out.'

Attica's Kasimati adds: 'We have unpaid invoices, as the Greek Public Sector owes us money. We try to stay as calm and as patient as possible. We have been in business more than 35 years, so we have experienced difficult situations - although nothing like the present one - but still we hope for the future and for an agreement ... it will make a difference.'

As *FIDI Focus* went to press, Greek MPs were due to vote on whether to support the Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras's tough new proposals to secure another bailout. A few days before, the Greek people had overwhelmingly rejected austerity proposals in a poll. ■