

Interview of the SNF Co-President, Andreas Dracopoulos, with Protagon.gr

As I was walking to meet you, the Hellenic Ministry of Culture announced that the e-ticketing system for certain archaeological sites is finally operational. The e-ticketing service is implemented with the support of the Stavros Niarchos Foundation, among others. I must admit that I laughed cynically when I read that this self-evident project, that has been announced by so many different governments, is finally realized...

I am laughing cynically as well for the same reason... And not about this matter only.

Do these delays in projects that you are directly involved through grants annoy you?

If they annoyed us, we would have left, and we would not bother anymore. Look at what has been happening for so many years with the National Museum of Contemporary Art (EMST). It's embarrassing... I visited three years ago, when its construction was completed. Your heart weeps because it is closed. For years, the building is just sitting there.

Have you decided about the new request submitted by EMST for the 3-million-euro grant (*it is noted that, two years ago, the SNF had withdrawn its grant due to delays in fulfilling the prerequisites on the part of the museum, which then submitted a new, updated application to receive a new grant, a few months ago*).

Yes. We decided to move forward with the 3 million euro grant. It will be announced soon, and the relevant grant letter will go out by the end of the week.

This is amazing news. I can't even begin to think about the lost opportunities from the huge momentum of documenta14, all because we didn't have a fully operational EMST.

But what you describe is Greece's story. We do not seize any opportunities.

You left Greece when you were 18 years old, and you permanently reside in New York. Do you think you could ever live here, permanently?

I'm not sure... If my children weren't still in school, I would definitely spend more time in Greece, and I would be more active. But, for me, it is simple. Greece should be implementing the following model: The country "opens," on March 1st, and "closes" on October 31st. During the remaining months we are on vacation, preparing for the next season. During these eight months, the country must focus on three areas: Tourism, Agro-tourism, and Culture. Unfortunately, we still follow the Xenia model (*).

Midnight Express and Mykonos

And yet, Four Seasons and other powerful actors from the world tourism industry have been entering the Greek market recently.

They are here to "exploit" us, and they take advantage of our weaknesses. These investments could have taken place much earlier, and on much better terms for us. Allow me to tell you something: I visited Istanbul for the first time about six years ago...

()Note from the SNF: The Xenia hotels in Greece flourished from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s approximately, traditionally operating during the summer months only. More specifically: "Xenia (Ξενία) was a nationwide hotel construction program initiated by the Hellenic Tourism Organisation (Ελληνικός Οργανισμός Τουρισμού, Ε.Ο.Τ.) to improve the country's tourism infrastructure in the 1960s and 1970s. It constitutes one of the largest infrastructure projects in modern Greek history... In 1974 the construction program was complete. The Xenia program itself was officially terminated in 1983, and the hotels were given over to private operators or eventually sold off. Some hotels are still operated privately under the Xenia name. Many of the program's hotels have been designated as historic monuments for their architectural value. Three have been demolished, while other surviving examples have been substantially altered or are in a dilapidated state." Source: Wikipedia.*

What took you so long?

I was influenced by *Midnight Express*, which I saw when I was about 14 years old (laughing). Another reason, of course, was what they taught us in school about Turkey—and also about Macedonia. Your average person finishes school, having learned to hate the Turks. When I visited Turkey, the country was at its best. I saw two Four Seasons hotels, while in Athens, in Vouliagmeni, in the entire coast all the way to Sounio, there wasn't even a single one. That says something.

They are here. Now.

And they got it for free. To me, it's a shame that Greece is a minority stakeholder. Don't get me wrong. I am not a nationalist. These, however, are assets that belong to us, and we must have a first say in this. If we had properly invested in the "Tourism, Agro-tourism, Culture" model, we would be 11 million happy people, and we would have gotten rich.

Happy, rich, working from March to October... What you are describing looks like the Mykonos model.

Personally, I would do pilot programs for the islands. One island dedicated to culture, another to wind power, another to gather the top experts in desalination. And the island of Mykonos, I would just let it be that... Mykonos. Just the way it is. I'd say "gentlemen, do something that you haven't been doing: pay your taxes, as people should have been doing in the rest of the country, and good luck." I visited Mykonos three years ago and I was shocked: there are no sidewalks, no infrastructure. How is it possible, that with the island having so much money, they can't organize themselves to create the necessary infrastructure? At the end of the day, they owe it to all those who visit and spend 10,000 euros or more for their holidays. They obey the "let's grab whatever we can" model. At the same time, you also see beautiful, small islands and when you disembark there, you see garbage everywhere. This is lack of respect.

This year, during the Summer Nostos Festival at the SNFCC, when people left after major concerts, they often left a lot of trash behind, even though there are garbage bins everywhere, more so than in previous years. Is something changing in the relationship between the citizens and the Cultural Center, or is

this maybe the arrival of a new type of audience...

This is true. We are at a very difficult turning point for the SNFCC right now. But, everything starts from the top...

The Cultural Center is a beast

From above?

Yes, everything starts with the Center's administration and the government. The Cultural Center is a real beast, it constantly requires your attention, and you must constantly meet the project's demands. You need to be continuously on top of it, to anticipate everything, to be ready for every possible scenario. Unfortunately, this is unusual in Greece, and it is not part of our mindset.

This project requires tremendous strategy, planning and attention. Don't get me wrong. We have an excellent working relationship with both the Center's administration and with the government. We have always treated the Center as custodians, even before it was gifted to the Greek State. We never thought it belonged to us. And when some people were very vocal against handing it over to the State, we kept replying that governments come and go, but the State is the citizens themselves. YOU.

The contract that you signed for the establishment of the Center provided for the construction of a metro station. Do you continue to push in relation to transportation?

This is not just a simple commitment; it is part of the contract. We are constantly writing letters, and we talk with every government regarding this matter. Unfortunately, it is not progressing.

Have you thought of activating some of the contract's clauses?

If this was the responsibility of a specific government only, I would consider activating the contract clauses. But this relates to every government. It is a matter of mentality and infrastructure. Within two years, more than 5,000,000 people have visited the SNFCC, almost half of Greece's population. It is also the second largest tourist attraction in the city, following the Acropolis. It's common

sense... However, we do not replace the government, but rather complement it, so there is nothing else we can do about this.

The “allowance” and the President

It has been almost 18 months since the SA managing the SNFCC has been without a President, after the resignation of Yorgos Kimoulis...

This is none of my business. I don't mean this negatively. This is a decision we took long before we even started: we will hand over the Center and we will never meddle with its management. I am very absolute about this; something is either yours, or you hand it over. To those who ask me, I always say that the only thing that's important to me is whether the individual who leads the Center understands the value of the project. But we have no involvement in the selection of the individual.

Do you ever visit the Cultural Center as a citizen, to attend activities or events?

I visit Greece mainly in the summer. Unfortunately, the Greek National Opera, which I really want to visit, starts its programming in the fall. I must say that I really like and appreciate Yorgos Koumentakis, the Artistic Director of the GNO. I believe that he is doing a great job. I met him for the first time about a year ago, and I finally saw a man who understands the value of this project and the potential for all of us to grow together. Of course, I do not wish to be unfair to the Library, but it needs more time to take off. The move from its former location was difficult, and there is a terrible lack of support from the State. Just look at its budget, which is only 300,000 euros. That's crazy. We are talking about the National Library of Greece, a pillar of culture and knowledge. (**)

Do you hear of any complaints by the individual organizations, and the SA, in terms of their relationship?

You can't avoid complaints completely. What I always say, is that the project is larger than all of us, both SNF that built it, and any government. Of course, we at the Foundation are emotionally

*(**) Note from the SNF and the interviewee: A few days later, the following [article](#) [available in Greek] was published on [Protagon.gr](#) indicating that the Greek State, over the last few years, has significantly increased the funding of the National Library of Greece.*

charged when it comes to the SNFCC. I must confess that it feels just like one of my children moving on.

It hasn't exactly left. It's still getting an "allowance" from you (laughs)

Sure. We may still offer an allowance and ask "how is school, do you need any help?" But it's really gone.

Will you continue with grants towards the SA and the institutions housed at the SNFCC? We are already in the second year of the five-year grant you announced towards SNFCC SA.

Our attitude is "why not?" There is greater danger that they will lose our support, rather than us stopping. If the Center keeps running smoothly, we will not stop. It could, of course, run even better, but this needs more time. I would like to repeat that we are happy with the collaboration with the resident institutions, with the administration and the government. We have an amazing collaboration, and sometimes I am misunderstood. I assure you that I am not trying to offer political support to any particular government. Actually, to be more precise, I am on the side of every government that stands by its citizens.

Polakis, Cavafy, Martin Luther King

On the occasion of your grant initiative to enhance the Health sector in Greece, totaling more than 200 million, I have read many comments on social media regarding your collaboration and coexistence with the Deputy Minister of Health, Mr. Polakis.

I will give you a straight answer. About ten Health Ministers have been to our offices. We have always asked them: "How can we help you?" Guess what? Mr. Xanthos and Mr. Polakis were the only ones that responded immediately. That's a fact, and I don't care what others say. They came here at the Foundation, on the sixth floor and we discussed the Evangelismos Hospital. And then they said: "would you like to hear what we have to say?" They informed us about the need for a general hospital in Komotini, and about the fact that there is no Children's Hospital in Thessaloniki. I must confess, that I didn't know that there was no children's hospital outside of Athens. I said

right there and then: “Is there any objection to doing this? Let’s decide right here and now.” And, we decided in ten minutes. Our collaboration is impeccable. We do not ask for anything but, in order to approve a grant, we always check that the specific project will have a positive impact on society at large, and that the right professionals are in place to implement it. It is important not to say a wrong “no.” It is not as important to me that we say a wrong “yes,” and I don’t care if someone says that I was fooled. It is important not to be arrogant.

Have you recently visited a public hospital in Greece?

Yes. What is there to discuss? What is happening is a shame. But, it is like a miniature version of the Greek State. You have some people who give everything they got in order to keep in place something requiring help from the top. The situation we are in now is not even a choice. It’s like Survivor.

An interesting choice of word. Survivor... Do you watch Greek TV?

No, I don’t at all. I get my information through the Internet, and blogs, and by talking to friends. There is extreme polarization. Every TV channel takes a specific stance, not only in Greece, but everywhere. I am a man of the center, independent. For years now, my position has been that there is no Right or Left anymore. What matters is doing the right thing for society.

And, at this juncture, you created, along with the John Hopkins University, the Agora Institute, which deals with issues of democracy, civic engagement, and dialogue. In the era of extreme polarization, I wonder if there will be targeted actions in Greece.

There is extreme polarization everywhere. Just take a look at what is happening in the US. The Agora Institute will have many applications. It is like Ithaca. I only care about the journey, not the destination.

Cavafy. Recently, you have been mentioning “Ithaca” a lot, even though I think that JFK is the top reference in your speeches.

Martin Luther King also. “It is not the color of your skin, it is your character.” I have, actually, expanded upon this: “It is not the color of

your skin, your sexual preferences, your political affiliations, your social and financial status that matter, but only the content of your character.”

Macedonia, the World Cup and an urban legend

You spoke earlier about all the wrong things we learned in school about Turkey, and about Macedonia. What is your position on the name?

I know that in the US, and generally outside of Greece, the country was never referred to as FYROM, but as Macedonia. As a friend of mine once said, the “M” in FYROM does not stand for Marmelade, but for Macedonia. So many people have made so many mistakes that it is almost unethical to fight something that we have effectively lost. I realize that this is a very sensitive issue, but it’s being twisted into many directions for political gain. It should have never reached this level. Many are to blame, not only Greeks, including, of course, the media.

You are often critical of the media in your public statements.

I mainly get my information via blogs. I am interested in reading a specific opinion, even if I disagree with it, as long as it is not polarizing, and as long as it is based on facts. I can’t stand witnessing these constant attempts to make a quick profit. As a citizen, I believe that the media could play a more meaningful role. I believe that journalists—the soldiers—are good. It is a matter of managers and owners. We live in Greece and we can see what is happening. When you end up with an industry where you are at risk of losing your job if you write something that does not serve your publisher, then the role of the media has been wasted. At that point, you either quit—easy to say, but quite difficult to do when your livelihood depends on your work, especially in crisis-ridden Greece—or you just say: “Oh well, why is it up to me to change the media and the country?”

To get back to the Foundation: the SNFCC is completed and now the Health Initiative is underway, with the creation of the General Hospital of Komotini, the Children's Hospital in Thessaloniki and the Chair of the University's Faculty of Nursing in Evangelismos Hospital, designed by Renzo Piano. What is the timetable for this project?

This project will definitely require more than three years. We are going at full speed, and so are Renzo Piano and the government, but the local officials and institutions will definitely play a vital role as well. The truth is that when we were working on the SNFCC, some people were questioning our methods, but now everyone is working with a positive mood. Everyone now realizes that SNFCC happened, there is goodwill from everyone, a cushion that lets you know that you are going to make it.

Culture, Health. Are you already working on the next big goal? Is there something on the horizon?

There always is. (smirking)

In which area? What are its characteristics?

Greece. Hellenism. That's all I can say.

There is this urban legend about the competition between the Stavros Niarchos Foundation and the Onassis Foundation.

(Laughs). I had once discussed this with Antonis Papadimitriou, the President of the Onassis Foundation. I told him that our Founders were healthy competitors, and that we are healthy collaborators. I truly believe that. I know from my uncle that he could have been fighting with Onassis over a business deal in the morning, but dine together in the evening. Today, we are healthy collaborators, with both the Onassis Foundation, and all the other Foundations working for the good of society, each one according to what they know, want and are capable of.

I know that you love football. What are your observations about the World Cup?

Well, this World Cup is very interesting. First of all, the cycle of star players is over. This is due to many reasons, but mainly to the fact that the gap between teams has shrunk, the level has been raised,

and there are no major differences in talent between the different teams. It is very interesting to see four European teams distinguishing themselves during this World Cup, at a time when Europe is going through a major crisis. I don't know whether this is a stable or random indicator.

Which team did you initially support?

I was supporting Argentina and Spain. So, all I want now is to see a good game.

Give it your all, even if you don't reach the top

You have three children. Do they know exactly what you do?

This is a very good question and, I must admit, it is something that occupies me. They are 8, 11 and 14 years old. I believe that deep inside them they know what I do, without fully realizing the scope of the work. However, because in New York, they often attend some of the Foundation's activities, they have a significantly elevated sense of social responsibility.

Would you wish for them to get involved with the Foundation?

I don't view this as a family matter. The Foundation is not a business. It is platform for action. If they want to work with the Foundation, I would welcome them. Yes, then, if they are passionate about it. I do not push them towards it. I want them to see and understand what is happening exactly. But I don't push them. After all, there is already so much pressure on the young.

Yes. Perhaps you saw a major story on the news today about the suicide of a 14-year-old who seems to have been a victim of bullying.

It's tragic, yes. I followed the story, mainly through blogs. I want to share something with you. When I read a story, I always check the comments by readers. I did the same today. What I read shocked me. Many of the replies were so off, without any emotion. I wonder when we became so indifferent, so apathetic... It's terrible.

What is one piece of advice that you will never forget?

It's not just one, but many daily ones. One that I have always followed and I constantly pass on to my kids is "give it your all." Sometimes, my children tell me that they didn't do very well in a particular class.

And I reply that I don't care about that, and that if you gave it your all, then I am happy. It requires great care, because parents put tremendous pressure on their children. Just because you provide your children with all the right tools, that doesn't mean you can demand of them to be at the top. You give them the tools because you can, or because you didn't have them and you don't want them to miss out. From then on, they must learn to appreciate people, circumstances, experiences, life itself. Every night, you should be able to go to bed and say: "I gave it my all," with passion, and *philotimo*, even if you make mistakes. And, as I tell my children, you should never harm anyone with intent. This could happen in life, but if it does it should be without intending to.

This is a very Christian thing you are saying.

I'm circling back to Martin Luther King. Everything is about your character.