

I wanted to ask you: Do you think that the experience of the coronavirus, an experience you had in New York, changed the world?

First of all, I would like to thank you for giving me this opportunity to discuss things. There is no longer any doubt, for me at least, that there was a feeling of fear—fear of death no less—for a great number of people. Worst of all, we didn't know anything about the virus. This had many consequences. But, I think that the problems we see now have nothing to do with the coronavirus. The coronavirus brought all of our preexisting problems to light. In a sense, it completely exposed us, worldwide. It exposed all of the weaknesses of the system, all the inequalities and, above all—something that I believe will stay with us—the fact that any feeling of trust has been lost, toward anyone and anything. Even trust toward certain institutions, such as the WHO, the World Health Organization. On the one hand, the institutions themselves are partly to blame, because they kept saying one thing and then something completely different.

However, there are also political interests behind everything; there is polarization in any issue being discussed. In the first seconds of expressing yourself, people are quick to judge: “You're on this side,” or “You're on the other side.” Any notion of a healthy platform has been lost, where all of us would be able to discuss, to analyze, and to accept—as the doctors themselves have accepted, regardless of the fact that some did not want to say it—that we don't know very much. Regarding this virus, we don't know much. We keep getting new data; new research keeps coming out. And the unfortunate thing is that, depending on who produces each piece of research, some will believe it and some will reject it. Whereas we should all be learning, listening, examining all sides... Does the virus have to do with genetics? Does it only affect certain blood types?

For me, that was the lesson. That, if we don't straighten ourselves out, we are bound to keep suffering. This is an opportunity to straighten ourselves out as a society. To rebuild institutions, to fight polarization, which of course existed the pandemic but has now reached the level of a cancer. Soon, we will only be able to discuss with those who agree with us.

There is a great deal of debate about whether all this is the result of hubris towards the planet, towards the environment, that we have gone too far with our financial ambitions collectively, in the West, and as individuals. Do you share this viewpoint?

If we have a couple of glasses of wine then, after a while, yes, perhaps we can agree on something like that in a philosophical sense. But, let's not overdo it. In general, it is an awakening, that we really need to change and adapt as a society and that we need to rebuild our way of life. I'm afraid that this too will be quickly forgotten, as was the case with the September 11 attacks. I was in New York that day in 2001, and I remember that for the next few months there was a lot of talk that it was over. The city center, downtown, was to be no more; that life would change. And it did change, in terms of security and lifestyle in such an environment but, very soon, in the long run very quickly, that too was forgotten. The best-case scenario here, I think, is an awakening, to focus on health. It is time to have a

discussion on the role of the public and private sectors. And I strongly believe and continue to say that what is needed is cooperation between the two sides. Neither governments, nor states, nor the private sector are able to deal with these big problems on their own anymore.

What do you think about the way that Greece, the Greek government, dealt with the coronavirus crisis, compared to what you experienced in New York?

There is no doubt that it was a success. It helped a lot that the country shut down early. But I also think that we were lucky because there were other factors that helped such as, for example, the fact that the Greek population went through a tuberculosis crisis after the war. However, objectively, it was a success on behalf of the state, the government, and the people. And it continues to be a success. Of course, what we're seeing now worries us a little bit, how we went from one extreme to the other. From being required to send a text message to take the dog out for a walk, within a week or two, we're back to socializing in huge crowds. That is where a sense of responsibility comes in, and it sometimes saddens me that, in Greece, this has become quite rare. And I say this because it's not difficult for everyone to realize how important this triad is: keep your distance, especially indoors, wear a mask, and wash your hands. Unfortunately, we've already gone to the opposite extreme. It worries me a little bit.

I would like to ask: In your circles, with the people you talk to and have contact with, has the Greek brand changed? Has our image shifted from a failed State to a model in terms of dealing with the coronavirus?

I would say that, objectively, yes. Greece complied quickly, its citizens followed the doctor's orders, and I think that the country's image was indeed improved. On the other hand, we must not forget that we are living in a reality where everything moves very quickly. Meaning, that all that we accomplished could completely be erased if something bad were to happen on, say, one of the islands in the summer. If we don't pay attention and don't follow some of the basic guidelines and start to have many cases on the islands, the whole thing could turn upside down. It's not like you can do something good and then spend years saying, "Look what I did then." Constant effort is required. So, the answer is "yes, but." *But* we need to continue to be serious and to have a sense of responsibility, both to ourselves and to our fellow human beings.

Let's talk a bit about the Foundation. It has now become quite well known to the average Greek in many ways. I'm wondering, what was the initial vision for the Foundation? Has it changed over the years, and how?

So, the Foundation started in 1996 after the passing of my uncle. I always thank my uncle, Stavros Niarchos, because if it weren't for him, we would have the financial means to do what we have done...

I often get asked why he chose you and not someone else from the family or his business staff.

When we all go "up," we can discuss this. However, I worked with my uncle and we had many years together; we shared a common viewpoint, and there was a lot of hard work. The creation of the Foundation, which was something my uncle always talked about, was, for him, a way to contribute, to give something back to society. In his life, he was always very lucky. Of course, he worked really hard until the end, but he saw the Foundation as a way to give back to society as a whole, even after death. We've always had a wide range of activity in the four areas of Health & Sports, Education, Arts & Culture and Social Welfare. We have followed this model, so that almost all projects can fall into one of these categories. We always follow the position that we act in a complementary manner, we do not replace, that our grantees are always our partners. We thank them for giving us the opportunity to contribute to society through financial support. We have no business or commercial activities and that allows us to be completely focused on philanthropy, which I think is very important. And we continue, as we have always said, to let the work speak for itself.

We built the Cultural Center during the crisis in 2012, 2013, 2014, and we delivered it. During that period we made three grants, totaling 300 million euros, which I believe really helped the country in the middle of the financial crisis. Now, we have announced another initiative, totaling \$100 million, to fight COVID-19, of which we have already donated about \$60 million worldwide, in order to help as much as we can. I believe that the Cultural Center contributes significantly to the country. It keeps hope for the future alive, and that is why I think that the people have embraced it. So, I think that we are very lucky, and we have this opportunity to be close to society and to always help to the best of our ability. And something that I always say to my family and friends: it is as dangerous to underestimate as it is to overestimate. So, I am afraid of this. I don't want us to be overestimated. Again, we are here to complement and not to replace.

What part of the Foundation's budget is spent in Greece? Is there any estimate for that?

Look, yes, there is an exact estimate. Because the truth is that my uncle was born and raised in Greece. And we have always said that approximately half, in the long run, at least half the money is used to contribute in Greece. Due to the Cultural Center, which is the Foundation's largest single gift to date, we are talking about much more than 50% of the grants. As we're doing now with the COVID fund, we have made grants in 124 countries but Greece was, is and remains the Foundation's main grant destination for many reasons. And on we go.

I would like to ask how you were viewed by politicians and how this changed in the course of time. For example, I remember that in the beginning there was a great deal of suspicion about the Cultural Center from the Left and from others. Others perhaps saw you as a possible way to make some money—I imagine you have experienced this. I wonder if this has changed over the years.

Indeed, we have experienced this, but we have sought not to be influenced by these aspirations. We are not involved in politics. On the other hand, we have a vision. I never wish it to be seen as arrogance, but it is a reality. I was saying this during the construction of the Cultural Center, from the time we signed the first memorandum during the time of Kostas Karamanlis, to the time we handed it over to Alexis Tsipras, I think we crossed paths with 7 different governments. And what I always said, not arrogantly but practically, is that governments come and go. The projects remain, especially when they are projects for the public and for the entire society. That is precisely our strength; that we have no business interests, nor are we looking for anything in return. We just give. But, of course, when we give, we want to do it as best we can. This does not mean that we have all the answers. But we have a way of working and we always try not to let external factors affect the end goal, which is to do the job in the best possible way, in order to benefit society and nothing else.

Was there a time when you were disappointed by something you wanted to accomplish, which was shipwrecked or torpedoed for some reason?

The truth is—and I say this as a Greek—that it has saddened me, in general, that we have had some problems with certain Greek projects. We have been to 124 countries, our activity spans 25 years, and we have contributed approximately \$3 billion; we are talking about huge amounts. The main problems we have had have been with Greek projects. Now, I may be saying this because it frustrates me even more as a Greek person, and that is why I am more critical of this.

It must be said that we have had a very good collaboration with all Greek administration. I think that everyone has now realized that we are not asking for anything, we are not here to take anything; all we want is to contribute and to do the job properly. And with most administrations—I think with all of them—we've had a great partnership. Do we have some projects that are delayed a lot? Yes, and it is a pity because, in the end, it is society which suffers the delays. This, I think, is the deeper problem with bureaucracy. I think it is deeper than administrations. It has to do with the state, with how the state works. Many things could be made easier, and I think that, in practice, a lot depends on individuals. If the right person is found who believes in the project and wants to help, they will try, and, somehow, there will be a result. But it would be best if this became a way of life and a way of thinking. And it troubles me that in Greece we have not managed this yet. There are good moments, there are good projects; I think there are good things happening all the time, which improve the situation, but there is still a long way to go.

I imagine you are referring to projects such as the one at Evangelismos Hospital, or the Fire Department Training Center, projects that have been delayed for years or have simply stopped.

Yes, let's take a very good example and even insert ourselves as part of the problem. Two years ago, in the summer of 2018 with the fires, we had announced a grant, totaling 25 million euros, for the Hellenic Fire Department. We are still fighting to make it happen. Of course, the people of the Fire Department have also made a great effort, but there are still bureaucratic problems. However, we are still moving forward, step by step, and both sides are doing work. As I always say, we view our grantees as partners and we move forward together.

Evangelismos was a very sad situation for me, in the sense that while we basically wanted to build a new hospital building for the Faculty of Nursing and to help rebuild the park in front, we were unfortunately confronted with bureaucracy and the usual reaction: "We don't want the Niarchos Foundation to come and help." Of course, we have already helped with equipment, and we have also helped with ICUs. We could have also said: "Since you don't want help, we're leaving." We can also be stubborn. It's just that sometimes it's such a shame that things could be done much faster, especially when it comes to projects that help society.

Is there something big on your mind that you would like to do in the future?

Look, we already completed the Cultural Center, which I think was a very big project. It also became the new home of the National Library of Greece and the Greek National Opera, which I think upgraded the whole cultural sector in Athens and in Greece, if not worldwide.

Now, we are in the middle of two initiatives, the initiative on COVID-19, as well as the Health Initiative, which includes many other programs, such as educational programs. It also includes three new hospitals, in Komotini, the children's hospital in Thessaloniki, and in Sparta, so I think this will be of great help in the field of health nationwide. So, we have implemented great projects for culture, for health and, of course, we continue with all other projects. We keep an open mind and, as I often say, we listen to everything, and we try to implement projects that we believe will benefit society and that are run by people who also work hard and share a common vision with us. So, the answer is "we are here." We have nothing specific other than health at the moment, because there is a lot of work to do in health. It is not just the money and the work required for the next 2-3 years. And because we are not—as I sometimes say half-jokingly—an ATM, we do not have unlimited financial capabilities, everything is calculated carefully. Also, there are emergencies that arise, as was the case with COVID-19, and we try to help there as well.

Was there a moment that gave you great satisfaction? That made you feel that what you're doing is worthwhile, something that a random person said or a personal experience that you had?

There have been countless moments, but a recent one was in February when I was in Athens and Renzo Piano was at the Cultural Center and we talked about the Health Initiative. At the end of the discussion, a young student—I think it was a medical student—got up and took the floor and said: “I don’t understand why my country basically provides me with a free education, and after I finish my education, I have to leave because the country can’t offer me work and can’t absorb me.” So, he says, “I would leave too. But, after what I heard today, about how much is being offered to the health sector, I’ve decided to stay.” At that moment, I stopped and thought that there is no greater compliment and no greater joy than the one given to us by such personal stories. That’s the whole point. To change things from the inside and from the bottom up and to give young people opportunities. So, such moments make us want to do even more.

And another example is the Cultural Center, which was a great challenge from the beginning. For me, personally, the challenge was whether people would embrace it as if it was their own. And, because this was taking place during the crisis, many people would say to me: “Why are you building a Cultural Center in the midst of the crisis? Who will be interested in this thing?” And it really gave me great joy that thousands of citizens visited it and that they continue to come and really see it as their own.

Let’s go to a topic that we have discussed before. In the past there was a longstanding tradition of contributions by great benefactors in Greece. In your opinion, is the Greek business elite rising to meet the current challenges, in this respect?

In 2015, I did an interview with TIME magazine and some people were really upset and frustrated with what I had said then, that those who have the means can do a lot more. Because even in terms of taxes, they didn’t pay, and still they didn’t produce any projects or do philanthropy. There has been a lot of improvement since then, but there are still individuals who make a difference. The lines are thin, but I still think that those who have the means can indeed do much more. And not only can, but should do more. Our country is a paradise, but if we ourselves don’t take care of it, we cannot always keep blaming outsiders. I think there has been lots of improvement. There are many who, either openly or anonymously, help. I would just expect those who have the means, as a group of people, collectively, to help much more. Let us not kid ourselves, the private sector would have collapsed if it weren’t for the public sector, if it weren’t for the Central Bank. Everyone must help. Each should have their role. I believe in what they call “flexibility within a structure.”

For me, structure is the framework that states must create, there must be law, there must be a framework within which society can and should function. And then, there must be flexibility provided by private organizations, and they should help out and we should cooperate. This is what is called public-private partnership, which has been much discussed in the last 10-15 years, but has not been put to practice yet. The Cultural Center was a unique such example, not only in Greece but worldwide. And, it worked and it keeps working splendidly. So, the answer is yes, those with the means should generally do more. We should do more. On the other hand, there must be even broader partnerships between the public and private sectors. This is now clear, not only in terms of everyday life, but also in terms of dealing with existing inequalities. And everyone should be at the forefront. No one can rest or just wait and take, without giving.

Is Greece changing? Do you see potential for it to change even more?

It is changing, but it definitely needs to change even more. I believe that we have a beautiful country, but our whole philosophy needs to change, in tourism, in agritourism, and in culture. We have it all, we could be one of the best in the world, but the mentality needs to change. We can't live in a country where you are told: "The summer season is between July 15 and August 15." The country should be working within a framework from March to October—a full season. We have been blessed with amazing places by God and by our ancestors. Nature tourism, agritourism, and culture. I believe that a major shift in the country's goals was needed. And we would now have 11 million very happy people, financially in a very good position, citizens and a country that everyone would love to visit. They still want to come and they do come, but a lot more work can still be done that would lead to amazingly positive results for everyone.

There is a question of national survival, as we are faced with a great threat, an unpredictable Turkey. I wonder what your views are on this topic, and if you believe that the powerful and all of the people of the diaspora have a role to play in this challenge.

Yes, they should. The fact that we have to read every day about how many ships Turkey has sent to the Aegean, where it will drill, the fact that aircraft keep passing and entering our airspace, is a constant challenge. This continuing tension is worrying because, at some point, a mistake will be made and someone will take one more step. It is something that, unfortunately, remains a problem.

I have a theory—I don't remember who said it first—that the borders of Greece are the borders of Europe. And there, Europe has completely failed. And that's when I turn really pessimistic about Europe, especially when you see that we underwent an economic crisis, a refugee crisis, we are going through a COVID-19 crisis. Europe has not been able to cope with any of the crises. And not only that. It doesn't seem to be learning, it doesn't seem to be moving forward, to be building. We have the euro, the common currency but, beyond that, they can't even agree on bonds, and everyone is only interested about their home country. And this worries me. Because I'm afraid that if there is an emergency incident, no one will come forward to stop it. There is, of course, America, which I think is saying the right things—and I think would do the right thing—but this is a European matter. In other words, for me, this attitude is shameful if we want to call ourselves European. Sometimes Europeans say the right thing, they pay you a visit, but there is no specific plan, there is no strategy in any context, no plan for the refugees, for immigration, for the economy. Instead of examining the problem of a member state in a European context, we see it as a domestic problem. And this, instead of strengthening us, weakens us as Europe.

The last thing I would like to ask: Today's 30-year-olds in Greece have already been through a long crisis. Now they are experiencing a second crisis on top of the first one. What would you say to these people. What could they possibly hope for?

That's a very difficult question. What can you say to a young person? I've talked to many young people who come up to me and say, "I'm going to leave the country." And what I always say—and what I would say even to my own child—is that my heart is sad, but my mind is telling me "you should leave." You can't tell someone who tells you they've found a better job, with better financial conditions, not to go. That's why I recounted that story before, with the young student who said, "I changed my mind and I'll stay." Because that's what we should all bet on. I think that we are all working hard to make the situation better, but the truth is that today's 30-year-olds have already been through a lot, and I think we must all help to improve their opportunities.

On the other hand, I always keep my hopes up. You should never give up. Life goes on. Life has become harder, faster, more insecure. But I believe in young people and I always say that they need to be more involved in public discourse and public matters. First of all, because it is their life and their future and secondly because we also need young people to come in and help, especially in a more global context where everything is changing. When we were growing up, we used to say that generations change every 10-15 years, now generations change every 3-4 years because everything changes very quickly for both the present and the future. So, what I would tell them is this: "You were unlucky, keep working, give it your all, get more involved with public discourse, and let's move forward together."