

Andreas Dracopoulos on *Kathimerini*

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I am proud to be Greek

“I am proud to be Greek, we all have an obligation to do things for the country”, says, among many other things, Andreas Dracopoulos, the Co-President of the Stavros Niarchos Foundation in an interview with *Kathimerini*’s Sunday Edition.

We have an obligation to do things

Andreas Dracopoulos, Co-President of the Stavros Niarchos Foundation, talks about the crisis, politicians and the wealthy.

Interview with Katerina Bakoyianni



Andreas Dracopoulos, Co-President of the Stavros Niarchos Foundation (left) with architect Renzo Piano at the worksite of the Cultural Center. The SNFCC, as a concept, involves the construction and complete outfitting of the new facilities of the National Library of Greece (NLG) and the Greek National Opera (GNO), as well as the creation of the 170,000m² Stavros Niarchos Park.

Andreas Dracopoulos, Co-President of the Stavros Niarchos Foundation, was forthcoming to all but one question. He did not wish to disclose the precise extent (20% according to the will) of the fortune passed on by the Greek shipping tycoon to the Foundation for charitable activities in Greece and around the world. With this small exception, he laid everything on the line, answering all questions while giving out the impression of a man who does not hesitate to openly express his opinion, even if his answers are

bound to displease some. In his own words: “I come from the outside, I speak my mind and—in a good sense—I do not depend on the Greek establishment.” Isn’t it the same with everyone who has grown up in riches? Mr. Dracopoulos provides a different explanation with regards to the charitable activities of his family in our country. “Our power in Greece lies in the fact that we do not ask for anything, from anyone. It is a big deal not to ask for anything.”

He welcomed us in the Foundation’s offices on Vasilissis Sofias Avenue, wearing an ordinary T-shirt—the typical hot summer day apparel of those who have the luxury of being their own boss. Perhaps his informal attire has something to do with the years he has spent living in the States. Stavros Niarchos’ favorite nephew—the grandson of his sister Mary Dracopoulos—left Greece after graduating from Athens College at the age of 18 to study Business Administration at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania, and never returned. Today, he lives in New York with his wife and three young children. From there, he coordinates—in addition to his own business activities—the operation of the SNF. From 1996 until today, the Stavros Niarchos Foundation has approved grant commitments of \$1.45 billion/€1.1 billion, through 2,718 grants to nonprofit organizations in 110 nations around the world. In 2012 and 2013, the Foundation announced two new initiatives, totaling 200 million euros, to help the efforts to address the economic crisis in Greece and the high percentage of youth unemployment. Our conversation began with the following question:

– **How come you are the face of the SNF, and not one of Stavros Niarchos’ two sons, Philip or Spyros?**

– It so happens that I am more involved with the Foundation. I do not consider myself the “face” of the SNF. It is simply part of my job.

– **Does the Foundation’s philosophy correspond to Stavros Niarchos’ vision?**

– For me, the important question is this: Why wasn’t he himself involved in philanthropy? However, if we go back 20 or 30 years, there really was no philanthropy as we see it today in the faces of Bill Gates or Warren Buffet. In the US, philanthropy/charity has become an industry. While in Greece, if you tell someone that you work in philanthropy, they will either call you a thief... or an a**hole.

– **Is this your own experience of the Greek NGOs?**

– As with everything there are exceptions, but it is a fact that a large percentage of charity work is done for specific reasons and there are many who are trying to exploit charity in order to secure a better image for themselves.

– **Why didn’t Stavros Niarchos give money for charitable purposes while he was alive?**

– That was a different era. Nobody gave a lot back then. He used to give some money to hospitals, or when a priest would come over asking for money for a specific church... Today, the welfare state does not exist anymore. It has been replaced by a welfare society. The state, by itself, is not enough anymore. It has fallen short, and not only in Greece. But, in my opinion, the private sector has also failed, mainly because of greed. So, what remains then, you may ask? The answer is the right partnerships between the private and the public sector—something which Obama also started to talk about in the States. Philanthropy, for me, is the “third leg”, and a lower one at that. Firstly because, in practice, even Bill Gates’ 70 billion dollars are nothing compared to a state budget and, secondly, because it would be

morally wrong otherwise. I would not want to entrust the lives of everyone, with regards to major social issues, to a single individual. Regardless of how good the intentions of that individual may be.

– Why do you still use the term “philanthropy”, which is reminiscent of a different era in Greece—it has even been connected with the actions of Queen Frederica—instead of using more modern terms like “social service” or “social contributions”?

– Just because some individuals exploited the term, that is no reason for us to be afraid to use it. It *is* philanthropy. Philanthropy needs to be pure. It needs to translate into giving, both in practical and moral terms. Otherwise, the game is lost.

– Do you believe that the SNF has succeeded so far in its mission in Greece?

– What does it mean to “succeed” exactly? We are fortunate enough to have a great legacy. We have made mistakes in the past, and it is certain that we will make more in the future. Precisely because we receive so many applications for grants, our process of evaluation involves examining if there are any reasons to say “no” to a grant application. This way, we try to avoid becoming arrogant. Because, who are we to say “yes” or “no”? On the other hand, whatever we manage to do is much better than not doing anything. Personally, I am content even if we are only able to help just one person.

– Is the SNF taxed in Greece or is it based in another country?

– Like many other Foundations, it is based in Bermuda. Greece did not even have the necessary legal framework. I remember at the beginning, when we made grants, there was a law in Greece stating that 10% must go to the Ministry. This was unheard of! Always taking a commission from everything!

– Did Stavros Niarchos pay taxes in Greece?

– He was not a Greek resident. He was citizen of the world, in the true sense of the word. He constantly moved from one place to another, briefly staying in Switzerland, France, America and Greece. Everywhere he stayed, he paid all due taxes. Everything was legal.

– Was everything also moral?

– I don’t know a lot about that era. What I do know is that today you can’t call yourself Greek and cheat the system with offshore accounts abroad. I have nothing against the rich and the well-off but—and maybe I am wrong because I don’t live in Greece and look at everything from the outside—I see a whole class of people who do not provide jobs, do not engage in philanthropy and, from what I hear, do not pay taxes. So, what exactly are they contributing? And then you have a middle class which is left to carry all the burden. This is unfair, both practically and morally. I was recently reading an interview with Emmanuel Kriaras, who was saying that national solidarity is now completely absent and the only thing that prevails is personal self-interest, even today, in the midst of this severe, humanitarian crisis. I regret never having met the man personally.

– Do you pay taxes in Greece?

– I live in America where you are taxed for the entirety of your income across the globe. In Greece I pay taxes on my property.

– Did you receive the new property tax (ENFIA) for your property? Was it a surprise?

– It was unbelievable! I am lucky, because I have the money, but the amounts charged are insane.

– **Should Greek ship-owners pay taxes?**

– Of course. Why shouldn't they?

– **Wouldn't they leave the country, if their privileged status was to come to an end?**

– Let them leave! Good luck to them! But where would they go? In America, in England or France they would have to pay taxes. We are in a tax haven and they are selling us this tall-tale, that if the ship-owners are taxed, they will leave the country. I mean, I don't have anything against any of them personally, but this is the prevailing mentality of a whole class which should be doing much more to contribute. Last year, they agreed to pay an extra tax and they presented it as philanthropy! If I were a politician I would have told them that they are lucky to be living in this country, and that they should be paying their taxes.

– **Politics and politicians... How different are they in other countries where you have lived and worked?**

– Even today, there are certain politicians in Greece who would not survive in any other country of the world. And I am not only talking about countries in Europe or America. They would not even survive in third world countries. They have failed, but still they are in power. If the troika was to come up to us tomorrow and give us 350 billion euros, my question would be: should we be celebrating, or crying? Because in six months everything would be the same again.

– **If you were a young man today, would you stay in Greece, or leave?**

– My mind would leave, my heart would stay. The heaviest price we will end up paying as a result of the economic crisis—the effects of which will be significantly noticeable within twenty years—is young people leaving the country.

– **Did you listen to your... mind and decided to leave Greece?**

– Sometimes I think about how things would have been if I had decided to stay in Greece, and hadn't began working with my uncle in America right away.

– **Would you have ended up doing approximately the same things, thanks to your financial status?**

– I don't think so. Greece is like quicksand, and once you are caught in it, it's hard to escape. But, let's not be cynical about everything. I am proud to be Greek. We all have an obligation to continue doing what we can.

The Cultural Center does not belong to us. It belongs to the Greek people...

The SNFCC, as a concept, involves the construction and complete outfitting of the new facilities of the National Library of Greece (NLG) and the Greek National Opera (GNO), as well as the creation of the 170,000m² Stavros Niarchos Park. The project is realized in the area of the old Hippodrome, with the

direction of its architect, Renzo Piano. The project's budget is almost 566 million euros and, according to the contract, it will be delivered to the Greek State, upon its completion in early 2016. This is the most frequent criticism which Mr. Dracopoulos is often called to refute:

– Is the Greek State able to undertake the full control and operation of the SNFCC?

– It is not our responsibility, nor did we want to be given the authority to “run” the National Library of Greece. The National Library of Greece and the Greek National Opera are two national pillars of civilization, and part of the state.

– But, what if the State fails in the SNFCC's administration? Won't all the efforts of the SNF have been in vain?

– No. It is the State that will have failed. If the State fails to meet the challenge, what can I say? I will be ashamed to call myself a Greek. But, the Foundation will always be close to the SNFCC, as long as the State operates it properly and in a transparent manner.

– What is it that operates correctly in the Greek public sector, that gives you hope for the proper operation of the SNFCC?

– I do not live in Greece. I don't know... On the other hand, the sense of decency (*philotimo*) has to awaken at some point. The same people who criticize should start helping. The project belongs to the Greek people. It doesn't belong to us. If the people don't embrace it...

– Can the people embrace it, without access via the metro?

– Of course not. But this is also not our business, whether people will get there via tram or metro. How people will be able to access the Cultural Center is the responsibility of the State.

– Do you think that in Greece, perhaps the State is driven by power or money to pursue cultural policy?

– Remove “perhaps” from that sentence, and you have your answer. This is the problem in our country. Of course, this also happens in other countries, but here things have gotten completely out of control.

– So, is it the case that one is building the Athens Concert Hall and the other is building the Cultural Center?

– Let us not complicate things. I take this type of questions personally because, in our case, it is 100% philanthropy. We only give and ask for nothing in return. And, it is not like we are building two palaces. We are merely providing a new home.

– Wouldn't it have been better if the National Opera had been relocated to the Athens Concert Hall?

– Even today, why haven't they relocated? I don't know. I would gladly accept this type of criticism if we had shown up one day to build this project and then we had disappeared. But, after having helped all of Greece, from top to bottom, providing assistance to both young and old, this irks me quite a bit. It is not like we simply attached our name to the project and asked everyone to “praise us”. For us, this is simply one more donation, just like all the others. It just so happens that the numbers are much larger in this one. We contribute to our country to the best of our abilities.

– Is the project in danger if SYRIZA comes to power?

– I do not think so. Why? I have spoken with Mr. Tsipras and he did not give any such impression.

– Is there enough room for the SNFCC, the Athens Concert Hall and the Onassis Cultural Center in tiny Athens?

– When something functions properly it is not afraid of the competition. Good breeds more good.

– The Stavros Niarchos Foundation and the Onassis Foundation. Are the two foundations competing, even after the death of the two men?

– It's not a competition. We are on the same side, each Foundation contributing in the way it wants and according to its abilities. For me, it would be the same if someone told me that they have no money but volunteer five hours of their time to help. Stavros Niarchos himself told me this and laughed about it: "Everyone thought me and Onassis hated each other, but even though we would fight each other about our business during the day, at night we would drink together."

An oasis for sports, surrounded by trees

With regards to the triptych "Environment-Culture-Sports", the SNFCC's sports facilities will be so designed as to give the visitor the impression of being in a forest. There, among the trees, there will be a track and field arena, a cycling track surrounded by lush vegetation, while the water Channel will host triathlon, swimming and canoeing races. The result will be a "small Central Park" with scattered fitness equipment, embedded in nature. On Sundays, symbolic races will take place in collaboration with the New York Road Runners Club. Parents will also be able to bring their children to the library to attend educational programs while, at the same time, they will be able to enjoy sports in the park.

Note: Translation of the original interview given in Greek