

## **The Greek upper class: "The wealthy should do more"**

By David Böcking

**Greek millionaires have become the object of hate because they often pay no taxes. But, what does the Hellenic Republic's moneyed gentry think about the crisis wrenching their country?**

### ***A meeting with ship-owner heir Andreas Dracopoulos***

The flashiest thing about Andreas Dracopoulos is the white watch he is wearing, together with several leather wristbands. Otherwise he epitomizes understatement. Jeans, a t-shirt, and dark coloured sneakers: the laidback chic of those who have no need to display their wealth, or no desire to do so.

Dracopoulos comes from a ship-owning family. The wealth of Greek ship-owners is legendary, and Dracopoulos's uncle is one of the Greek legends - Stavros Niarchos once vied with Aristoteles Onassis for the biggest yachts, the swankiest parties and the most beautiful women.

The ship-owners' wealth was for years left virtually unquestioned. Greece was proud of this unique industry, in which the country excelled worldwide, granting its ship-owners extensive tax exemptions through an article in the Constitution that is still in force today. In any case, men like Niarchos had so many international activities that it was hard for the State to keep tabs on them. He was, according to Dracopoulos, "a true cosmopolitan and citizen of the world", adding that his great uncle, however, had never dodged his taxes, not even in Switzerland to where he retired.

Yet, now that vast swathes of the Greek population are suffering from the harsh fallout of the financial crisis, the privileges of ship-owners are no longer simply taken for granted. There are repeated calls for wealthy Greeks to shoulder a greater cost burden of the crisis. This commitment was part of the pre-election campaign of left-wing Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras' government. Yet, very little has happened so far.

After negotiations broke down at the end of June, even EU-Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker reported that he had forced the Tsipras government to tax the ship-owners more heavily: "I had to do the Greek government's job."

The Greeks' latest reform proposal did announce "the termination of the preferential tax treatment of the maritime industry ", yet the final document of the latest Eurozone Summit does not even mention ship-owners. Instead, the first package of reforms legislated this past Wednesday places further burden on low and middle incomes, since it is based on pension cuts and an increase in Value Added Tax.

Andreas Dracopoulos is one of the few wealthy Greeks to personally decry this injustice: "The rich should do more, there's no question about it", he says. Dracopoulos is in a position to say that because charity is his profession. He heads the Stavros Niarchos Foundation, which is

funded by his great uncle's legacy. Since its establishment, the Foundation has made available, according to its own reports, approximately 1.2 billion euros.

### **"The rich have to pay more taxes, period"**

In recent years the Foundation has channelled vast sums on prestige projects such as a new Cultural Center in Athens. In the meantime, however, there emerged more essential needs. Through the "Initiative against the Greek Crisis" approximately 100 million euro has been allocated, between 2012 and 2015, to projects such as mobile clinics, school meals and shelters for the homeless. Because of the worsening crisis, the same amount has been allocated again for the same purpose, to be dispersed this time in just one year. A package of the same amount is earmarked for combatting youth unemployment.

Such programs are an exception for Greece, unlike the US, where Dracopoulos has been living for years. "Philanthropy is a business in its own right", he states. "It is a Greek word, but in Greece it is virtually non-existent."

So should the Greeks simply made do with the charity of the rich? No, says Dracopoulos. "Taxing the rich should be increased, period." He also has clear views about the industry in which his own family owes its prosperity. "The taxation of ship-owners is too low. It needs to be updated and adjusted."

### **Germany bears special responsibility**

Yet, the ship-owner heir demands generosity from others as well, not only wealthy Greeks. He shares the view of the Tsipras government that Greece's creditors should write off part of the debt. Dracopoulos refers to assessments according to which the recipient of most of the financial aid was not the Greek State but rather its creditors, German and French banks in particular. And he recalls the 1953 London Debt Conference, where part of Germany's war debt was written off.

The Greek government, however, has not made it easier recently for the rest of Europe to be generous. The war against creditors, especially Germany, was harsh, including Nazi comparisons and accusations of terrorism.

Dracopoulos acknowledges that the Greeks may have made mistakes. However, he believes that Germany bears a special responsibility, due to its financial and political power. "The strong must show magnanimity"

*Translation of the [original interview](#) published in German.*