

Greece can be rebuilt

Mr. Andreas Dracopoulos, Co-President of the Stavros Niarchos Foundation, talks about the crisis, the Stavros Niarchos Foundation Cultural Center, politicians, and the business class

Interview with Alexis Papahelas

Andreas Dracopoulos is Co-President of the Stavros Niarchos Foundation. In his interview with *Kathimerini*, he discusses the great project in Falirio, the role of Greek society's bellwether in addressing the crisis, the importance of philanthropy at a time when the welfare state is collapsing, and the role to be assumed by a *welfare society*. Mr. Dracopoulos is very critical of the Greek business class, which, in his opinion, is not up to the task and does not fulfill adequately its obligations to the country and to society. He talks about the challenge of managing the Park, the National Opera and the National Library, while he refers to the Concert Hall of Athens as belonging to the past, both in terms of its creation and evolution. Finally, Mr. Dracopoulos explains his own vision of how Athens could become a top tourist destination, like Barcelona, when the Foundation's project and the regeneration of the coastal front are completed.

– An important project is currently under construction in Athens. However, many people have questions: what form will it ultimately take, to whom it shall belong, when will it be ready, etc.?

The main thing is that the project belongs to the Greek State and is managed by an Organization, a not-for-profit entity (Limited Liability Company), which has been given the use of the land, which belongs, of course, to the State. The Organization is currently controlled 100% by the Foundation, which pays for everything (design, construction, equipment). The agreement with the state is that at the end of 2015, when we expect the project to be completed, we will hand it over, along with the management company, to the Greek State. The Greek State will be the sole owner of the project. The Foundation will withdraw from it completely. But we have the right to staff the Organization. According to the grant's terms, validated by law, the State must comply with all of the Organization's contractual obligations for five years. I refer, of course, to the Organization that will undertake the maintenance and operation of the Stavros Niarchos Foundation Cultural Center, as well as organize activities and events, mostly in the Stavros Niarchos Park. The National Library of Greece and the Greek National Opera will be entirely independent anyway. Hence, the main issue is whether the State upon assuming full control of the project is capable of managing it properly. In my opinion, there are two things to consider in relation to this: the first is entirely philosophical. I believe, as a Greek national, that the state must be capable of "running" such cultural and national pillars, as the Greek National Opera and the National Library, with all that this entails. This is where misunderstandings arise. By running we don't just mean money. And I say this because in all the monthly discussions held by the committee formed by the Foundation and representatives from the relevant ministries and the two organizations, everyone speaks of financial support. But it's not like that.

Put the infrastructure in place, create the legal framework, appoint a manager, and make sure that both the Library and the National Opera are healthy organizations to the extent that they can be. Not everything can be perfect, I know, but there must be some order. The money will come too, later. I am sure of that. It will come from the state, it will come from third parties, and we will help also. We are making this gift, but society and the state must be in a position to cope, and to take care of the basics, that is to say, to run it, to keep it clean, to encourage people visit, to make it a destination. That's the main thing, and everyone must help, each one in his/her own way. It will get financial support. We will also help financially until it stands on its feet, but we will not be the ones managing those two organizations within the overall project. But if the state cannot run these two organizations, then we'll have serious problems.

– Are politicians aware of the challenge, so that they do what they need to do in order to ensure that the state is ready to manage the project?

– As a system and in institutional terms, no. It has happened only on an individual level. I must confess that Kostas Karamanlis (the former Prime Minister) had personally realized, I think, the importance of the project and was back then, of great help in getting the process underway. Now Samaras (Prime Minister) has realized it too, even more so, both as a self-contained project and as part of the beginning of a new Greece, of building a new Greece. And this project is a first but important step of a general effort and a change of mentality. We aren't satisfied with everything just looking good. We deeply believe in the overall process of building the project, a process based on merit, with attention to environmental issues, and with respect towards everything being done correctly and in the best possible way. And now that the Visitors Center is opening, we aim to make this major project accessible to the public once every two weeks, through a presentation followed by a guided tour, so that the public may learn about it and about the way it is constructed.

– There is, of course, a risk, about the state's ability to financially sustain all this, and in question to whether it may turn into an empty shell, as the Athens Concert Hall (Megaron) is at risk of becoming today?

– Yes, certainly. Denying this would be completely unrealistic. If the economic situation in Greece gets worse, which I don't think it will, then there is, indeed, such a risk. It's a gamble for all Greeks, and not just for the Stavros Niarchos Foundation. It is, of course, a very large grant, but it is still just one of the many things the Foundation is involved with. In terms of magnitude, this project is huge. It's also huge financially. But we are doing our job. That's what our job is: to help in various areas, and then move on to the next project

Now, you asked me about the Athens Concert Hall. I think that's interesting too. Because, in my view, it represents another, older era, both in terms of the way it was built and organized, and because of its evolution or lack of it. In my view, as things stand right now, it is dying a slow death. I'm not one of those who claim that there is no place for the Athens Concert Hall once we have the Stavros Niarchos Foundation Cultural Center. Right now, the Athens Concert Hall could, indeed, become a cultural center for all of Greece, a living place, used by both different organizations and friends.

– There was an argument, at some stage, that the National Opera should have moved to the Athens Concert Hall, which supposedly has the infrastructure for an Opera House, and that Falirio, should be used for something else.

– I have no idea. In terms of how we began, we did not go and ask to build a National Opera. They came to us. And it just so happened, that it was also possible to build the new National Library on the site provided by the state. Thus, we were able to do something both for education and culture.

– While the project was in the planning stages there were many who criticized it, and there were even conspiracy theories. Did that affect you? Did it endanger the project?

– The project was endangered philosophically. As we said already, it is a major project, launched long before the crisis. Once the crisis arrived, and we were ready to go ahead with it, yes, there were some – fair, I think – comments, along the lines of “Greece is sinking and you want to build a National Opera and a National Library?” For a while, this affected us and forced us to think about everything deeply. We came to the unanimous conclusion that we must persevere for two reasons: completing a major project in the midst of the crisis would provide jobs and hope; it would also be an opportunity for us to contribute towards building and creating this new Greece, to do good things, to create a quality project, which society may embrace, and which may mark the beginning of a new Greece. It's interesting how the crisis, which has caused us to do some soul searching and reflect upon things, has, at the same time, given us the chance to continue, fully aware of the risks, but also convinced that the positives would outnumber the potential negatives. So, we're carrying on with the project, and we are providing jobs, hope, and the prospect of a better future. We are, by now, certain of its value. At the same time, we decided that, above and beyond what we were doing already, we should allocate additional resources to combat the social crisis, especially in the area of social welfare, and help people in need. So we launched, in January 2012, the additional 100 million euro initiative, to help provide relief for society at large. We focused our efforts on social welfare, education and health.

There is no longer a social welfare state, as we know it, but rather a social welfare society. We do not replace, we only complement. Sometimes, especially now, because of the crisis, we get into it deeper than we'd like. We do it deliberately, because we need to, but it's not our purpose. We never want to create the impression that we are replacing the state. We couldn't, even if we wanted to. And even if we could, we shouldn't. As a Foundation, you must only complement.

We mustn't only look outwards. We must try to save ourselves.

– Which way are the scales tipping? What are the positives and the negatives, and where do you see the country in ten years from now?

– We need to fix our shop ourselves, I am afraid. We mustn't look outside to others only. We must try to save ourselves. We mustn't expect those on the outside, whoever they might be, to help us. We need to sort out our country on our own. The good thing, and at the same time a strange thing, in my view, is that society, those at the bottom, who were not to blame and who have been paying the price, have understood everything, they are ready, and they are calling for a “cleansing”. But the leadership, be it the politicians or the businesspeople, who are trying to explain and to guide the country out of the problem, those, in other words, who are at the top (although there are, of course, exceptions), have not realized the severity of the problem. It's not about what will happen to their careers, but about what will happen for the good of the country. That's what gives you hope, because what happens from the bottom up ultimately, with time, will triumph. The risk is that with globalization some countries begin to slip into the margins. The greatest risk, to me, is that we don't remain confined to the margins. I'm afraid that we might fall into

the mentality of “never mind, we got through it, we are scraping by, we’re OK”, which, to me, would be the final stroke. Because it would mean that young people, who understand, will be forced to leave without hope and the ability to dream.

Greece has always lived with the notion of “Greece never dies”, but if we slip into the margins, it will be tantamount to death. This, of course, is happening to other countries as well. All this makes me hope, of course, and believe, but we have no time to lose, we have no time to look after our own interests. We must all work together to help Greece: the private and the public sector’s philanthropy, the privileged and the state, which must do its job better. It has to happen from top to bottom, because no one can do it on his/her own. In the context of collaboration, the entire political world must reconsider old beliefs.

In my view, there is no Left or a Right anymore, there is only Greece. There are good Greeks, capable of helping everywhere, including people on the Left and on the Right. In that context, we must have good collaborations. Even when you disagree with someone, either ideologically or in practical terms, I cannot believe that they cannot say – whatever their background might be – that, despite disagreeing on most things, there are five or six things on which everyone can agree. As a Greek, I want that from all political leaders.

Greece becomes Barcelona

– There is an ongoing project for the regeneration of the seafront. What’s the Foundation’s connection to it, and how does it tie in with its other work?

– The only thing we did, which was requested by the previous government, because it wasn’t in a position to do it itself, was to help so that Renzo Piano does the plans, which were necessary in order for the seafront project to be included in the National Strategic Reference Framework.

The idea was to link the seafront to the Cultural Center, which is good for the area, and Piano agreed. So we provided support for the plans, with the participation of several Greek architects, and that’s as far as we’ll go. We have no further involvement, but we are, of course, hoping that it’ll go ahead and I believe that it will. I think the whole idea ties in with Piano’s dream of bringing back (in Kallithea) what he playfully referred to as *Kali Thea* (good view), connecting the sea to the Acropolis, and restoring the Athens seafront to its former glory. From what I hear, it seems to be going ahead.

– Could that culminate in a vision of Athens becoming a destination in few years, just like Barcelona?

– Absolutely, that’s how we are thinking about it too, but, again, it requires organization, and we need everyone to play a part. We need the state providing infrastructure and transportation, and society to embrace it, to understand it, to turn it into a destination, in other words, to really experience it. One thing will lead to another. And that, I think, is the ultimate bet. It’s not whether it’ll work the first time, or whether the lights will come on. The lights will come on.

Its soul, however, will be the people, and it’s important how the state will embrace it by providing the infrastructure, so that people may go and feel like it’s truly theirs. Even Barcelona, in my view, didn’t become what it is in a day.

This leads us to another issue, which I think is worth the effort considering. I visited Barcelona before the Olympics and they knew what would happen the day after the flame went out to each project, and each building that had been constructed. This brings us back to the role of the state. We knew nothing. We can see how Barcelona, which had gone into decline, was regenerated with the right infrastructure and organization. This means that money alone makes no difference. That’s a misunderstanding that still prevails, especially in Greece. Money is only one part of the equation. .

The Greek “philotimo” is not lost

– What have you learned through the Foundation’s activities about local societies, and about the simple people you’ve encountered?

– I believe that Greece can be saved and rebuilt. We have our “philotimo” (*our sense of decency and duty*), which is buried somewhere so deep that it is almost lost. It didn’t disappear, but it is buried. Many values have been lost. That is not a political but rather a social issue. We still have our “philotimo”, however, and I think that, with a lot of work, the right mentality and the right leadership, we shall build a new Greece, which will be clean and beautiful. I believe we have it all: culture, history, tourism, good weather, agritourism. We are searching for something that we already have. We don’t know what we’ve got.

– Is there a leadership gap in Greece, in the broader sense and not just politically?

– There is a leadership gap in general. The only hope, once again, is to manage to bring together a few capable people. However, in addition to the leadership gap, there is also another thing, which, I think, all of us are starting to realize: the fact that we cannot find the solutions on our own, whether it is the state or the private sector, and no matter how rich one might be. We need collaborations. The collaboration between the public and private sectors, as well as the third sector (philanthropic and non profit organizations) has just begun. Even in America, it has yet to find its way. The idea, however, that it is only through collaboration that we can accomplish things, does exist. However, there must be collaborations for the benefit of society at large, not for the benefit of insiders. That's the problem in Greece. We work together for our personal gain.

– There is, in Greece, a state funded business regime that has learned to operate in a very specific way. Can that change? Does that regime give anything back to the country, which is what the country needs?

– No. I firmly believe that it doesn't. There are certain things that the privileged of this country must do, as citizens. They must pay their taxes, secure jobs as business owners, create new businesses, give hope and, of course, also share the profit. Philanthropy's role is complementary. It doesn't replace anything on its own, because it cannot do anything on its own. Nor should philanthropy be the only thing we offer. But I believe – and I'm not saying this because of a personal grudge against anyone – that, the privileged, as a group at least, have not responded to the call, which is very loud, and they have not done enough for the country's needs. So they either don't respond at all or, when they do, they do it in very specific ways that, in my view, deem the effort pointless.

– Have you met young people who could make a difference in this country?

– I have, and I believe that the secret is the next generation. It's the 35-year-olds, who are the ones being punished by the crisis, but who are also the ones who will be able to contribute, and to lead Greece to a new beginning. I believe that our generation too, even though we are considered young, is, unfortunately, part of the problem, in terms of our overall mentality. There are always exceptions, but overall speaking, we need to help the next generation as well to build a new Greece.