

OUR VISION IS TO HELP OUR COUNTRY GET BACK ON ITS FEET

The Co-President of the Stavros Niarchos Foundation speaks from New York about the two initiatives, totaling €200 million euro, which aim to support our fellow citizens, as well as the ambitious construction of the Cultural Center at Faliro Bay, actions that attest to the family's unbreakable connection to Greece.

He is a global, but profoundly Greek citizen. That's the "identity" of Andreas Dracopoulos, the man that handles in Greece and abroad hundreds of millions of euro worth of grants, in the areas of Arts & Culture, Education, Health and Medicine and Social Welfare. Keeping a very low profile, the 49-year-old nephew of the late Stavros Niarchos (through his sister, Mary Dracopoulos) shares with his cousins, Philip and Spyros, the presidency of a philanthropic foundation with global reach. Its creation was the vision of the legendary shipping magnate, which was realized immediately after his passing, in 1996.

According to his will, over 20% of his estate was bequeathed to the Foundation, and it was his wish that at least 50% of its support was directed towards Greece. From 1996 until today, the Stavros Niarchos Foundation has approved grant commitments of €1.07 billion, through 2,589 grants to nonprofit organizations in 110 nations around the world. It is worth noting, that over 80% of the Foundation's total grant-making support has been allocated to organizations and initiatives in Greece.

The construction of the Stavros Niarchos Foundation Cultural Center, designed by the acclaimed Italian architect Renzo Piano, is a landmark project and a cultural intervention of great importance. The Center is already underway, and will house the National Library of Greece and the Greek National Opera, which will be surrounded by a 170,000 m² Park. However, the Foundation's contributions do not end there. In the last two years, it has announced the commitment of 100 million euro to help ease the adverse effects of the deepening crisis (January 2012), and of another 100 million euro to fight youth unemployment (October 2013), eliciting a positive response from everyone. At the same time, the Foundation continues its grant-making activities in various areas in Greece and abroad.

In the Greece of Benakis, Zappas, Averof, etc, a country that was fortunate enough, in the past, to have known such great benefactors, we can see, today, that the virtue of benefaction has been lost on a national level. What is the reason for this? Is this also the case abroad?

As a society, we are defined, I believe, by the fact that there exists no understanding of what it means to be part of the social whole, and of the responsibilities we all bear as citizens. In the past forty years, we have essentially functioned as an egocentric society. We only look after ourselves. Philanthropy requires primarily a highly developed sense that one is a member of a social group. This is certainly not the case in America. Philanthropy is flourishing.

Although you and your cousins live abroad permanently, you keep strong ties to Greece. How do you manage that?

I was born and raised in Athens, and left for the States to study at the Wharton School of Business Administration at the University of Pennsylvania. I return to Greece every summer. Therefore, my ties to the country and its people were never broken. In any case, I don't believe that one is a citizen of one country only, especially these days. I'm happy to be Greek, but I'm just as happy to have lived the other half of my life in a country such as the US, where you are truly exposed to a multicultural environment, and thus get to know and appreciate better the world around you.

Besides, Stavros Niarchos himself was a global citizen. And shipping, where he excelled, knows no borders, just like Hellenism. Hellenism and "Greekness" can be found in a school in Astoria; in Louvre's Winged Victory (*Nike*) of Samothrace; but also in China, where, through a grant by our Foundation, students are learning Greek. My language, my faith, and the vision to help our country get back on its feet, which is shared by myself and those close to me, are what is mostly Hellenic to me.

There have been contradictory articles in the Press recently: some refer to Greece as an emerging economic power, while others present it as a country that's falling apart. What is your opinion?

The country is still going through an unprecedented – in terms of both length and severity – economic and, by extension, social crisis. There are certainly major efforts underway to help Greece recover, and there is a sense that we're no longer on the brink of disaster. It is, however, utopian and also dangerous, as it creates a climate of false security, to claim that Greece is currently an emerging economic power. Coming out of the crisis requires self-awareness and the realization, on our part, that we cannot carry on living in the same way. Furthermore, the need to change our mentality is no longer optional, but a one-way street. At the same time, we also need the European Union to acknowledge the sacrifices that have been made so far, and that a change of strategy, to one focusing on development, is required.

As a Greek living abroad, how do you feel about everything that's happening in the country?

It's all very unpleasant. It's not easy to keep reading negative articles about your country in the Press every day, for two straight years. It creates stereotypes about Greece and the Greeks that cannot be changed easily. The cultural and historical presence of Greece extends 3,000 years back. We have now come to a point where that history and presence are practically ignored. Within few months, the whole thing has come crashing down, along with our credibility. It's very hard to be a witness, from a distance, of the degeneration and agony suffered by an entire society.

Do you think that the Greek diaspora can help Greece and, if so, in what way?

There should be absolutely no doubt that the Greek diaspora can be of significant help to Greece. The Greeks of the diaspora are highly educated, and have economic power. They can provide expertise and investment capital, and they can create models for a different and much more effective way of development. They can also do substantial philanthropic work, which is important these days. All of that presupposes, of course,

that the Greek diaspora's relationship to the motherland will be built on an entirely different basis than the current one. And the change needs to be mutual, because there has been a lot of talk by the Greeks of the diaspora for many years now, which has not been followed always by actions.

How do you see entrepreneurship in Greece?

The concept of entrepreneurship doesn't exist in Greece today. The weaknesses are institutional and require profound and radical changes on all levels.

In less than two years, you have made two major grants, totaling 200 million euro. Do you think that grants can replace the State?

I point out what you just mentioned every opportunity I get. The Stavros Niarchos Foundation or any other foundation or organization cannot and should not replace the State. We are here, as a philanthropic foundation, to complement the actions of the State, to the extent that we can. Our role might be bigger today, due to the country's current situation, and we might be making more grants in areas that traditionally would be the responsibility of the state, but that doesn't change our fundamental mission.

We all have to realize finally, that we need to build a Social Welfare Society. A society characterized by dignity and decency, in the sense of respecting ourselves, and our fellow human beings. Such a society only could be strong enough to overcome the obstacles and cast off anything that's extreme and destructive.

The Stavros Niarchos Foundation Cultural Center is currently under construction and will be completed in 2015. What do you expect to be its future contribution?

The SNFCC is an "investment" in the country's future. It is a unique public-private partnership for a philanthropic cause, the first time, globally, that any country's National Library and National Opera are housed together in an urban green space of such size. There is no doubt that the project has enormous regenerative potential. To begin with, Kallithea and the neighboring municipalities – some of the most densely populated urban areas in the country – gain an invaluable "green lung" of fresh air just by the creation of the park alone. The same project creates a new landmark, a new potential destination for the whole family. The SNFCC's architect, Renzo Piano, is ingeniously raising the earth and hiding the building underneath the Park, encouraging a new dialogue between the Acropolis and the Saronic Bay. On another level, the Center also instigates a dialogue between our historical past, the problematic present we are currently experiencing, and the hopeful future that's being built.

What measures have you taken to ensure the smooth operation of the Cultural Center once it is handed over to the State?

The Cultural Center is not being created in a vacuum. The Greek State, the project's single owner, has been by the Foundation's side since 2006, when SNF announced its plans. It supported initially the idea of co-housing the organizations in question on the site, and continued by signing a Contract that was ratified by law in Parliament. We didn't just wake up one morning and say, let's make this 566 million project and see what happens. We have been working together with the relevant authorities from day

one. We have created a special advisory committee that meets monthly to discuss the project, in order to lay the right foundations. Together with the buildings, we are also delivering a set of studies that demonstrate not only SNFCC's sustainability but also its future profitability. But, as I have said many times before, at the end of the day, if the state cannot manage its own National Library and National Opera then we, as a nation, deserve everything that befalls us.

Could you mention a few important grants or projects abroad, and the criteria by which you select the grants that you make?

Although the Foundation, just like our founder, focuses mostly on Greece – 80% of our total support is directed towards Greece, it is, nonetheless, fundamentally global. We have successfully completed over 2,500 grants in 110 countries. Several of these grants promote Hellenism. For example, we support scholarships for Greek students at four major Canadian Universities, and we have created, through our grants, Centers for Hellenic Studies at Yale and Simon Fraser University. We have also collaborated with Johns Hopkins University, in the US, for years, and recently created the first Center for Talented Youth in Greece. Columbia University, the Museum of Modern Art, the Metropolitan Museum of New York, the Louvre, and also small schools, organizations that encourage the concept of volunteerism, humanitarian aid projects in the Philippines, in Haiti... the Foundation's grants go where there is need, vision, decency, added social value, the right people.

Could you share some of your Foundation's plans for the future?

The Foundation's activities currently develop along four axes: our ongoing, "traditional" action in Greece and globally, our major project, the SNFCC, our initiative against the crisis, which is nearing completion and may be continued, and our initiative to create opportunities for the youth. As a philanthropic foundation, all we can hope and strive for is to be in a position to provide relief, to help, but also, at the same time, to lay the ground for the future. However, we cannot change the world, and we certainly cannot and should not do it on our own.