

Distinguished guests, dear friends,

Good morning and welcome to the *Fifth Annual Stavros Niarchos Foundation International Conference on Philanthropy*. This year's conference carries special meaning for us since it is the first time that this gathering takes place outside Athens. We are simply delighted to be in Thessaloniki, not only because we are convinced that it is important to venture outside the capital, Athens, and engage other areas of the country, but most importantly because Thessaloniki, Greece's second largest city, is a very special place. It is perhaps of interest that there is a tradition in the city occupying the realm of the second largest city, since Thessaloniki became the Eastern Roman Empire's second largest city, after Constantinople, in the aftermath of Rome's fall to Germanic tribes in 476 of the Common Era. The city has always been located in a critical position, since it was the main link that connected the West to the East, and the most important city on the route that connected Rome to Constantinople. Of course, Mark Mazower who is here with us today and has written extensively on Thessaloniki, is the most appropriate person to provide us with a historical perspective on the city. The same applies to the city's Mayor, Yannis Boutaris, who is honoring us with his presence this morning. Nonetheless, I would like to talk briefly about Thessaloniki within the broader context of this year's conference.

Thessaloniki was Greece's and one of Mediterranean's most cosmopolitan cities. Although there are different types of cosmopolitanism, what I allude to here is simply the capacity of a city to foster and accept the urban co-existence of different cultures, to embrace openness and to thrive. In other words, engaging in the complex act of harmoniously living together and apart at the same time, embracing co-existence and otherness. For those of who have had an opportunity to walk around Thessaloniki – and I strongly encourage those who have not done so to try to find the time to do it – the physical manifestations of the city's past, as described above, are everywhere. The population exchanges in early twentieth century, and the Holocaust seriously dented Thessaloniki's multicultural character, very much in the same way that the emergence of the nation-state and nationalism across the Mediterranean basin stripped a number of cities around the region, like Alexandria for example, of their own cosmopolitan identity.

One could argue that the vision of the Barcelona Declaration, which is mentioned in the summary of this year's conference, is a cosmopolitan one, based on the fundamental concept of "*uniting*" a sea of different people with distinctive and divergent cultures. This very idea of a certain unifying elements in the Mediterranean heritage originates mainly from the unparalleled work of the eminent historian Fernard Braudel. But few decades after the reverse of the cosmopolitanization process, not only is this vision of "*unity*" blurred, but the prolonged socioeconomic crisis and the intense political upheavals are severely compromising the very essence of the Mediterranean as a sea of cultural, economic and political interaction, creating at the same time closed, isolated and unequal communities and collapsing conditions in critical areas such as social welfare, health, education and the environment.

Avoiding the maladies of nostalgia, and the pitfalls of suggesting that all was well in the region, the strife plaguing the whole Mediterranean basin today should motivate us to look back and consider carefully its multicultural past. The refugee crisis has become Mediterranean's most disruptive issue with far-reaching consequences for the whole area and the explosive potential to rip the whole region apart. It is one of the conference's main topics of discussion, and an area towards which the Foundation has dedicated significant resources over the last year. As countries and cities around the region, as well as the whole of Europe increasingly view migration and refugees as a major threat, we can only gain by examining carefully the bustling, thriving multiethnic and multicultural metropolises of last century. They offer a view and perhaps a model of successful diverse assemblages that is radically different of our current state of barbed-wire fences and homogeneous cities that include vast refugee ghettos.

All of us, the private, public and philanthropic sectors, should consider the refugee crisis as an opportunity to resuscitate, economically, culturally and socially, urban centers that have been for too long in a steep downhill path towards urban degradation and decline. It is only through the collaboration of all sectors, that is to say, the emergence of an effective and efficient social welfare society that such critical and complex issues could be addressed, and the middle could hold. By the way, without the middle holding its ground, the descent into a dark hole-scenario becomes effectively inevitable. Thessaloniki can play a pivotal role in such an effort. It has always been, by means of its history and geography, an agile, light, breezy, open city. As Athens continues to bear more heavily the scars of the prolonged socioeconomic crisis, Thessaloniki can engage its rich past, to evoke the potential of a post-cosmopolitan future, one that embraces the notion of the city as a hub of multiethnic, multilingual cohabitation that functions as an active hub of growth, innovation and competition. It's a big challenge, and Thessaloniki would have to want it, embrace it and pursue it.

In the heels of this year's conference, comes *Metamorphosis*, an international and local program of music, theatre, dance, visual arts, games and sports open to all that will take place in Athens at the Stavros Niarchos Foundation Cultural Center, from June 23rd to 26th. As the construction of the SNFCC approaches the finish line, and as the Foundation is preparing for the beginning of the process to hand over the project, to the Greek State, and the Greek public, its rightful owner, *Metamorphosis* aims to introduce the project to the public, inviting everyone to engage with the buildings and the park, and to experience and even test the space's potential to enter the city's urban fabric and to function as a truly public space, a real community. *Metamorphosis* is providing a sample of our vision for the SNFCC as a destination, a platform for creative expression, and a place of exploration and discovery that will, hopefully, incite in people the same feelings of belonging, community, dynamism, optimism and civility that have been fundamental elements of the process of building this unique, living complex. The question is, can Greeks once again self-ignite their true sense of *philotimo*, can we appreciate the obligations each one of us has to fulfill, can we grab the opportunity when it presents itself?

In supporting the construction of the SNFCC, the Foundation aimed, among other things to provide a blueprint and a vision for a different future and all the potential that it entails. That's where our involvement ends. As it is the case with Thessaloniki, and the potential of the city to assume a transformative role within the country and the region, in a similar way for the SNFCC, the public and the state must be willing to assume their own responsibilities when it comes to the SNFCC and its potential place at the center of the country's civic life. Life, at different times, provides chances, but they have to be properly grabbed. We sincerely hope that the new owners of the SNFCC will grab it; we sincerely hope that Thessaloniki will also grab its own opportunity to follow a similar path with that of Barcelona, more than 20 years ago, and become a thriving international port hub for Greece, for Europe, for the world.

We would like to welcome all of you join us in Athens after the conference and celebrate with us this milestone.

I would like to invite the Mayor of Thessaloniki, Yannis Boutaris, to offer welcome remarks on behalf of the city.

Thank you.