

Interview with Constantinos Stephanopoulos President of the Hellenic Republic

This interview was conducted by
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Born in Patra (Peloponnese) in 1926, Constantinos Stephanopoulos, after completing his law studies at the University of Athens, became a lawyer and was first elected to parliament in 1964 under the banner of the ERE, a rightist party founded by Constantinos Caramanlis.

After the demise of the colonels in 1974, he was named Secretary of State responsible for Commercial Affairs in the National Unity government, and later in the government of the New Democracy obtained successive portfolios of the Interior, of Social Affairs and finally the position of Minister to the Presidency of the government.

On two separate occasions in 1981 and 1984, he unsuccessfully attempted to become president of the New Democracy, defeated by Evangelos Averof and Constantinos Mitsotakis respectively.

On September 6, 1985 he resigned from this political party and founded the DIANA party (Renewed Democracy). He was the only elected member of this new party in the legislature after the elections of June 1989.

Refusing to participate in the legislative elections of October 1993, Constantinos Stephanopoulos ran in the European elections of June 1994, where his party obtained only 2,80% of the popular vote. At that point, he decided to retire from political life and dissolved the party he had founded.

Common candidate for the PASOK (Panhellenic Socialist Movement) and of the Political Spring Party (Nationalistic Right), he is elected on the third round, President of the Republic by the Chamber of Deputies on March 8, 1995.

Question: Mr. President, you have completed formal visits to the USA and several European countries. You have also formally received several heads of state and government in Athens. In your opinion, what is the image of Greece on an international level? What do Greece's partners expect from her?

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Answer: The image of Greece abroad corresponds to reality. Greece is an absolutely democratic country which respects international agreements, staunchly defends human rights and remains a stabilizing, peaceful force in the Balkans and eastern Mediterranean. The fact that Greece is a member of the European Union and NATO reinforces that reality.

Our country enjoys a free market economy far more developed than that of our Balkan neighbours. Indeed, Greece has the potential to help its neighbouring countries in their own development efforts. That potential is widely acknowledged and also confirmed by the activities of Greek entrepreneurs.

Greece is confronting the aggressivity from a neighbouring state¹ with a level-headed, decisive approach and I think that the justness of this approach is recognized consistently by most of Greece's partners in the European Union as well as by other important countries. I do, however, see that there does exist a difference of opinions relevant to the handling of those issues.

The image of Greece has been fulfilled by the country's achievements in culture and science, as seen in the tremendous concentration of recognized artists in all areas and the high level of Greek scientists in universities here and abroad.

Indeed, these current Greek contributions are internationally recognized.

Question: Greek civilization is ancient; however, could it now be in danger? Perhaps even the Greek identity is in danger within the European Union? What do you think it means today for someone to be Greek?

Answer: Ancient Greek civilization is one of the basic components of contemporary European culture and has remained a shared, rich heritage for all subsequent peoples. The principles of Greek civilization are so broadly accepted that the possibility of ignoring that legacy or placing it at risk does not exist. Of course, the question of contemporary Greek culture is particularly pertinent today because our culture contains elements which are not present in other forms of Western culture. I believe that the Greek cultural identity is not jeopardized by Greece's participation in the European Union. In fact the EU recognizes the importance of all the variations within the European cultural fabric and considers that rich cultural heritage —and rich it is—, to be a part of the whole.

I am not ignoring the fact that independently of our participation in the EU, we are influenced by foreign movements, lifestyles and mindsets, just as other states are also influenced.

I believe that the roots of modern Greek culture lie very deep and will endure. Being Greek today means bearing the burden of a deep, great cultural legacy which obliges us to promote constantly with respect and discernment the Greek language, to preserve the memory of both ancient and modern culture, to foster the study of the great works of Greek thinkers, and to help create new cultural works.

Question: You are the president of the Republic; as such, you are the guarantor of the national identity and of national unity and the arbiter in constitutional matters. How do you see your role? What do you seek to achieve during your mandate?

Answer: The jurisdiction and position of the office of president of the Republic in terms of the current institutional structure of the country is being clarified with precision by the statutes of its constitutional charter². Within that constitutional framework, each elected president exercises his duties with a view to ensuring the essential national consensus and unity, the protection of democratic institutions and the support of national rights and interests, both domestic and international.

I would be pleased if we soon fulfilled Greece's rich potential for economic development and also resolved the foreign policy problems which preoccupy the country.

NOTES

1. The term obviously refers to Turkey.
2. The Hellenic constitutional charter of June 9th, 1975 grants numerous powers to the Head of State within the framework of his role as an arbiter of the institutional structures. The 1986 revision of the constitution has removed most of these powers.