

# The Epitome of Resilience

An Interview with His Excellency Kostas Bakoyannis, Mayor of Athens, Greece

**EDITORS' NOTE** *Kostas Bakoyannis was born in Athens to New Democracy politicians Dora, first woman mayor of Athens, and Pavlos Bakoyannis. He served as mayor of the town of Karpenisi in Erytania and was then elected Regional Governor of Central Greece in the 2014 local election. In June 2019, he was elected Mayor of Athens and began his term on September 1, 2019. Bakoyannis studied history and international relations at Brown University and graduated from Harvard University with a Masters in Public Administration.*



H.E. Kostas Bakoyannis

## What attracted you to public service and interested you in becoming Mayor of Athens?

Mayor of Athens is my third local/regional government post in Greece. I find it inspiring to work close to the people, to try to make their everyday lives better. I've been the Mayor of Athens for almost a year now. It is a unique honor to serve this city. Athens is more than its ancient heritage; it is a modern, dynamic metropolis that has emerged from a decade of economic crisis with a newfound confidence and optimism, yet it is a fractious community and very demanding of its political leaders. It is my hometown, after all, and I am inspired by the challenge to make it better.

## How do you describe your leadership style and what do you see as the keys to effective leadership?

I believe in an ambitious vision for the future, the dedicated work of a talented and effective team, a bias towards innovation and meaningful change, and mustering the political will to address entrenched problems without ideological blinders. This also requires an openness to all kinds of stakeholders.

## How do you define resilience and how critical is resilience in addressing the crises facing the world?

For me, resilience is a process of understanding the challenges that my city faces and finding the most intelligent and integrated ways to deal with them. A city is a system of systems; a challenge, such as the pandemic, brings to the forefront the systems' interdependencies as well as weaknesses. Through

a resilience lens, we view a policy or initiative in its systemic role.

Resilience is about maximizing the possible co-benefits of a policy or initiative and ensuring that we don't create additional risks, now or in the future. We aim to bring different players into the process, across sectors, to ensure diversity, flexibility and redundancy. With different stakeholders in each project, we create ownership by people in and outside of government to ensure continuity and social cohesion.

Resilience, finally, is about creating adaptive policies that help "future-proof" cities to face the physical, social and economic challenges of the 21st century. We don't have a surplus of time or money. We must spend wisely to build economic development and sustainability, to promote health and wellbeing, to build government transparency and accountability, and to reduce the gaps of economic and social inequalities.

## What do you see as the contribution that Athens can make to build a more resilient world?

Athens is one of the world's oldest cities, with a recorded history of continuous inhabitation spanning well over 3,000 years. This is the epitome of resilience. Being reflexive and understanding the past is a valuable resilient attribute: we are, for example, planning to start using and to learn from an ancient masterpiece of blue infrastructure, an aqueduct that Hadrian built in the second century AD to bring water to Athens. The Athenian present of complexity and diversity and its scale are also resilient attributes. Athens is a city that stands between the Global North and the Global South, so resilient solutions that work in Athens can be more easily scaled up or down, adapting to a more or less rich environment. We have observed that sometimes solutions that work in Sweden or Canada are hard to adapt for less technologically-advanced, poorer cities.

## Athens plays a unique role in interpreting the origins of democracy. How does Athens' history provide an example of the resiliency of democracy?

COVID-19 has dramatized the crucial importance of mature democracies in our globalized world – the need for the rule of law

and the rule of reason supported by transparency, accountability and a bias for collaboration. Athens has, in the last 10 years, faced and survived a prolonged economic crisis, a large migration influx, unprecedented temperatures with lethal fires and flooding, and a global pandemic. These challenges brought the rise of a neo-Nazi party and widespread populism across the political spectrum, but our democracy prevailed and is stronger: we are now going through a post-populism era. Our trajectory might provide an example to countries currently undergoing populist and authoritarian convulsions.

## Athens has been a destination for many migrants. How has the migrants' plight impacted the city?

The immigration influx peaked a few years ago during a time when the city was deep in recession. The city struggled to support the needs of both the destitute immigrants and those in the local population who were suddenly impoverished. We have realized that all policies regarding the provision of basic needs to immigrants should be extended to our local residents as well. This can be challenging as international funding is often specifically targeted toward immigrant populations while local resources are limited.

## There has been, internationally, a trend away from cross-border collaboration, a rise in nationalism, and a tendency for nations to increasingly go it alone. What do you think this means for the future, particularly in the face of far-reaching crises like the pandemic and climate change?

To deal with today's global crises we need more democracy, humility, and an openness to innovation and collaboration across borders. It is evident that the many authoritarian rulers around the world today are ineffective at solving problems and are dangerous to their own people. What we need for the far-reaching crises of today is forward-thinking and proactive policies that build resilience. We need to establish far-reaching international networks that can offer cross-sector support and to foster innovation and social cohesion locally. Now, more than ever before, it is critical to have collaboration and strong global alliances in order to build a more resilient world. ●