



Athens Mayor Kostas Bakoyannis. Credit: City of Athens.

As Greece emerges from a decade-long financial crisis, the city of Athens is grappling with major challenges: E.U.-imposed austerity measures, a real estate collapse, ongoing security and migration issues, climate change, and now COVID-19.

Kostas Bakoyannis, 41, was elected mayor in 2019, promising stability and reinvention. The son of two prominent Greek politicians, Bakoyannis is the city's youngest elected chief executive but has had considerable experience. Holding undergraduate and graduate degrees from Brown University, Harvard University, and the University of Oxford, he was governor of Central Greece, mayor of Karpenissi, and served at the Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the European Parliament, and the World Bank. He also holds positions with the Hellenic Agency for Local Development and Local Government, European Council on Foreign Relations, and United Nations Sustainable Development Solutions Network. On a recent visit to Cambridge, he spent time with Lincoln Institute Senior Fellow Anthony Flint.

Stability and Sustainability in Athens, Greece

ANTHONY FLINT: You have said that you are focused not on grand projects, but on day-to-day quality of life in a city trying to make a comeback in a more incremental fashion. What are your reflections on your successful campaign and the experience thus far of being at the helm of local government?

KOSTAS BAKOYANNIS: I think in any campaign, it's always about the message and not the messenger. Elections in the past in Greece have been about candidates higher up, talking down to the people. I took a different approach and started walking out in the neighborhoods. I listened with care and found that the people want a city to build its self-confidence and be optimistic again. Now we are reinventing city services and reinventing the city. Athens has three records: the least urban green per capita in Europe, the most asphalt, and our houses have the most square meters. We want to reclaim public space and especially reclaim space from the automobile. We have been studying traffic circulation, and are planning to close parts of the city center to cars. We will also create an archeological walkway around the city.

All in all, I'm living my dream. I'm giving it my all. I've been in local government for 10 years; higher office doesn't compare. One day, when I first began my journey in local government, I was depressed and thinking we are a failure, and then I walked out and saw a playground we had just opened. It's not about resolving the conflict between North and South Korea. It's real, tangible, incremental change, improving the quality of life.

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AF: Athens has been vexed over the years by the problem of vacant buildings and storefronts, graffiti, homelessness, and a general image of being dark and dirty. Can you tell us about your plans to clean things up?

KB: There was a very good article in an international magazine about the Greek economy, but at the top there was a photo of Athens, with two homeless people sleeping in front of closed stores that were full of graffiti. This is our challenge. Don’t forget that we are in a global race to attract talent, technology, and investment. And Athens is changing day by day. To mention a few examples: We have adopted the “broken windows” theory of social behavior [which suggests that visible signs of crime and decay invite more of the same] and are coordinating with the police. We have special equipment and run campaigns to clean up graffiti. We have a program called Adopt Your City, and public-private partnerships that are already bearing fruit. We are asking people who care and love the city to come help us. Regarding drugs, reforms have been made. The parliament recently passed a measure on supervised spaces for drug use—we haven’t operated one yet, but we are preparing to make it mobile, so it doesn’t stay too long in any one neighborhood. Local government will be able to operate such spaces. We are reclaiming public space, like Omonia Square, a city landmark—I think that’s going to be a symbol. There are elevated expectations about public space . . . it’s not just public works. We are producing more of a product, an experience.

Athens is embarking on a comprehensive response to its residents’ desires for a safer, cleaner, more self-confident city. Credit: Matthew Peoples/Flickr CC BY 2.0.

AF: As part of that effort, you attracted controversy for clearing out squatters in the neighborhood of Exarchia, an effort that included dawn raids and relocating refugees and undocumented immigrants. How do you fulfill your campaign promise to restore law and order and curtail illegal immigration, while still being sensitive to the human lives at stake?

KB: Here is an example: An individual calling himself Fidel was running a hostel in a school, occupying it, and charging money. We securely moved the children to take advantage of social service provisions. Greek media have a thing about Exarchia. It becomes a political weapon for one side or the other. I don’t look at it that way. We have 129 neighborhoods, and Exarchia is a neighborhood with its own issues. Much of what we do has to do with persisting and insisting—it’s a question of who will get tired first. We will not get tired first.



On the subject of pluralism, we're the canary in the coal mine. We survived the economic crisis, and we're stronger today than in the past 10 years. We have more depth to our democracy, stronger institutions. We isolated extremists. We confronted the Fascist Nazi party Golden Dawn—we went to neighborhoods where they were doing well. We didn't wag our fingers and tell people they were bad for voting for Golden Dawn. We said: we can provide better solutions to the problems you face.

Athens is a Greek city, a capital city, and a center for Greeks around the world. Having said that, Athens is changing and evolving. I remember seeing a young woman who was black in a parade, and she was proudly holding the flag—I think what she was saying was, 'I'm as Greek as you are.' We want to make sure everyone living in the city has the same rights and obligations.

AF: What are the most important elements of your plans to help Athens combat climate change—and prepare for its inevitable impacts in the years ahead?

KB: Think different! It is all about working bottom up. What's happening that is most interesting in terms of public policy is in the cities, which are true laboratories of innovation. Nation-states are failing—there's so much partisanship, and a toxic environment, and bureaucracies that cannot handle real problems; cities are closer to the citizen. We are proud to be a part of C40. Athens has developed a policy for sustainability and resilience. Among other things, we are working on ambitious but realistic interventions to liberate public space, multiplying green space, and creating car-free zones. For us, climate change is not a theory or an abstraction. It is a real and present danger that we can't just sweep under the rug. It demands concrete responses.



Most of the early months of Bakoyannis' first term have been dedicated to basic improvements to urban parks and other public areas, even as he confronts the local impacts of global issues such as coronavirus and climate change. Credit: City of Athens.

AF: You recently had the opportunity to return to Cambridge and Harvard. What level of interest did you find in the future of Athens? Are there things you have learned from American cities, and what can the United States learn from you?

KB: I was enthused and heartened by the level of interest and am thankful for the engagement. I must admit that I was very proud to represent a city with a long and glorious past and a promising, bright future. We may live on different sides of the Atlantic, and in very different cities, but it is interesting that we face similar challenges as urban centers evolve and are transformed. And it is always great to share experiences and learning moments. Policies to further resilience are the most obvious example. And of course, battling social inequalities is at the top of all of our agendas. I am glad to have begun promising and fruitful conversations which will continue in the months and years to come.

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