



DELPHI ECONOMIC FORUM

# T H I N K P I E C E

#1



## Robert D. Kaplan

in conversation with Alexis Papahelas



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**Delphi Economic Forum** is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization working in close cooperation with civil society, public organizations, businesses and individuals. It engages business, political, academic, and other top experts in an effort to address emerging challenges, influence the national and regional agendas and promote sustainable and socially responsible growth policies for Greece, Europe and the Eastern Mediterranean region.

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Think Piece #1 is a summary of the onstage conversation that took place in Delphi Economic Forum IV between Robert D. Kaplan and Alexis Papahelas. This is not a verbatim transcript of the conversation and is based upon the video observation and written notes of the reporter. The notes are intended to capture only the main points made in the conversation and do not imply a specific opinion or commitment on the part of the discussants, the author or Delphi Economic Forum.

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The whole conversation is available on  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ly26cw18sEo>

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Robert D. Kaplan in conversation with Alexis Papahelas

# The World According to Robert D. Kaplan

Robert D. Kaplan was interviewed on the stage of Delphi Economic Forum IV, by Alexis Papahelas. Think Piece #1 is a summary of the main topics that were discussed during the interview as decoded by Katerina Sokou.

Robert D. Kaplan with Alexis Papahelas

# The World According to Robert D. Kaplan

## Globalization is in its early stages, and it's here to stay

Robert Kaplan is certain about one thing: Globalization is here to stay. “Globalization will go on and on,” he notes. “We’re in the very early, infantile phase of it.” At the same time, he adds that globalization is causing many of the domestic political and economic challenges that Western nations are increasingly faced with. Namely, Western elites and politics are confronted with the bulk of society that has been left behind. “So far,” he says, “globalization has divided societies down the middle rather



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Kaplan notes that countries such as the US and Britain have been divided by globali-

zation in two: the part of society that has slid upwards into “a whiskey-sipping cosmopolitan elite world” and is doing quite well—in the US, this world is concentrated along the East and West coasts and in college towns—and most other places where the bulk of society has been left behind. In his recent book *Earning the Rockies: How Geography Shapes America’s Role in the World*, Kaplan argues that globalization diminishes America’s geographical advantages and erodes American unity<sup>1</sup>. Or as Jonathan Rauch has put it, even though globalization is “a product of American influence and a bulwark against chaos, [it] erodes American influence and births new disruptions. For all its unrivaled military and economic power, the United States now has no possibility of bringing order to the world. The best we can hope for is to reduce disorder.”<sup>2</sup>

## Yet we are still living in an imperial age of increasing competition

Globalization does not mark the end of history—far from it. According to Kaplan, ours is still an imperialist’s world. “Forget what you hear in universities, in post-colonial studies departments, that imperialism is dead,” he says. Kaplan believes that imperialism never dies, and that in fact we are living in an imperial age, in which we are witnessing the gradual decline of the American empire and the rise of the Chinese empire—the notes that the routing of the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/24/books/review/earning-the-rockies-robert-d-kaplan.html>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

is inexorably reminiscent to that of the Yuan or Ming dynasties, or of the British East India Company-it's no wonder it's called the new Silk Road.

Since WWII, says Kaplan, the US has been an empire in all but name, given the breadth of its military bases all over the world, its diplomatic corps and its economic weight. Furthermore, the problems and frustrations of Washington are more comparable to those of the British or the French

Empire of the past than to those of any other modern-day state. "Coming out of the 20th century of ideological conflict that resulted in tens of millions of deaths, we are now back to normal geopolitical competition between major powers," he says. Indeed, Kaplan predicts the rise of the "Naval Age," as navies will become more important than armies. This is an era of container shipping supporting international trade, which means that sea lanes become more precious than ever before.

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## While witnessing a geopolitical recession due to weak institutions and leadership

According to Kaplan's analysis, the world at large is in "a geopolitical recession". He warns that a new crisis will not find the international community as united as it was in the recent past. All major organizational pillars of the international community—NATO, the EU, the US-Japan alliance treaty, the US relations with its other Asian allies—are much weaker than they were fifteen years ago. By contrast,

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The new masses are liberated from the past: they don't read, and they spew out leaders who appear to deal with problems that have been building up for decades”

in the aftermath of two major geopolitical events of the recent past, 9/11 and the Great Recession, international institutions responded well, quickly and very authori-

tatively. "This would not be the case today if there was another major geopolitical event, because all these institutions are in disarray." The response wouldn't be as coordinated or as forceful.

This is also due to the lack of strong leadership in the West, something he attributes to the digital age, which is "prone to authoritarianism and can be easily manipulated by populism". Kaplan says we are experiencing "a post-literate age," in which the electorate is less informed and "the new masses are liberated from the past: they don't read, and they spew out leaders who appear to deal with problems that have been building up for decades." Kaplan warns that there is no going back to the pre-Trump age either. "America was a great inspiring democracy in the print or



typewriter era,” he says, “but it is unclear that it can be as inspiring and as functional in the digital and video age.” President Trump himself is a creature of the digital and video age, Kaplan notes, and it’s impossible to imagine him except inside this new age.

## The US is losing its imperial ways, including its moral authority

According to Kaplan, “the US is simply not as dependable as it once was.” This seems to be the predominant sentiment not only among European and NATO allies, but

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Moral authority is the belief between other countries that “your word is dependable, that you’ll be with them in five years just as you are with them today; essentially, it’s the illusion of permanence.”

perhaps more importantly with Japan, “the most important treaty ally that the US has in the world,” according to Kaplan. Japanese politics

are dependable, he notes, and there is good personal rapport with President Trump; yet, for the first time, the Japanese are very worried about the consistency of the US and “terrified of what might happen in the Korean peninsula, terrified of China.”

To Kaplan, this means that the US is also losing its moral authority. He notes that this is not a moralistic attribute, not even a humanitarian one. Moral authority is the belief between other countries that “your word is dependable, that you’ll be with them in five years just as you are with them today; essentially, it’s the illusion of permanence. In that sense, America is losing its moral authority.” Domestic divisions have a lot to do with it, notes Kaplan, as there isn’t a united establishment anymore. The ideological divide is so big that there are starkly different political ideas in foreign policy.

## China’s model is working, but its internal stability remains the great unanswered question

If one thinks in terms of conventional capitalism, the Chinese model is in fact not a sustainable one. But in terms of imperial mercantilism, it’s quite sustainable indeed.

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China’s future direction, which way it will go over the next ten years, is the most important unanswered question in the world.”

Kaplan explains how the money never leaves China: China lends a poor developing country, and they use the money to hire a

Chinese state-run company, which hires Chinese state workers, a Chinese logistical system, and so on. China builds the project and gets paid for it. And if the host country falls into debt, China takes its ports, where it can put its submarines, its surface warships. “If the country can’t pay its debt, all the better for China,” Kaplan says, while also noting that China’s Belt and Road Initiative is focused as much on its domestic front as on facilitating its external trade.

According to Kaplan, China’s future direction, which way it will go over the next ten years, is the most important unanswered question in the world: “Will China

become a hard-edged, unenlightened authoritarian dictatorship using digital technology to control its population, or will it create such a large middle class that this middle class itself will become an agent of instability?” Kaplan notes that the middle class has demands and wishes. And if the governmental institutions cannot become more transparent and flexible, that middle class will lead to political upheaval. This is a concern for international stability too, as he thinks that if there is political turmoil in China, even to a modest extent, the incentive will be to employ nationalism as a cohesive device. “And that, of course, leads us to the issues of the South China Sea.”

## The US needs to deal with China in an organic way, and build leverage with Russia

Kaplan shares the insights and concerns of his “intellectual hero” Henry Kissinger on how to deal with China. Kissinger is concerned that the US does not view its relations with China organically but rather with a “silo mentality,” placing dispro-

portionately heavy emphasis on trade. But aggressive positions on trade will cause a Chinese reaction on the military front, as the two cannot be separated. According to Kaplan, Kissinger be-

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President Trump helps China in the long run: His policies aid China in becoming the great power in Eurasia, so China can afford these concessions.”



believes that “the US-Chinese relationship is wide ranging; it’s organic, and it has to be managed because it will be the organizing principle of geopolitics in the 21st century.” Similarly, Kissinger thinks that the US needs to build leverage with Russia so that the two countries can establish a normal, frank relationship—but notes that this cannot be done under the current US administration, as it is “too compromised.”

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A war could happen “because of a breakdown in the decision-making process, an impulsive statement or act by the president that could create a nightmare.”

Kaplan himself believes that the US does not have the geographical imperative in its competition with China. But here is where, according to Kaplan, the American brand comes into

play: If the US cannot use geography the same way that China can with the Belt and Road Initiative, what it does have is “a big idea, the idea of civil society, enlightened government, military and political alliance.” Kaplan is concerned that if the US gives up on that brand and goes into zero-sum bilateralism, China will win. And he cautions that the main, overarching reason that China is going to make concessions in the new trade agreement with the US is because “President Trump helps China in the long run: His policies aid China in becoming the great power in Eurasia, so China can afford these concessions.”

## The dawn of the digital age is increasing the risk of conflict

Kaplan believes that the new digital era is more prone to conflict and that war is more, rather than less, likely. He notes that the digital age is still in its early stages and compares it to the start of the nuclear age, in the early 1950s, when there weren’t any protocols. But contrary to nuclear weapons, digital ones are much more likely to be used immediately, as they become obsolete in a matter of months, which also leads to greater instability.

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Talking about the change in warfare, Kaplan notes that, because of digital technology, we all inhabit the same ecosystem. “Now the front line is just a click away,” as the Russian inter-

ference in the US elections clearly showed. He also thinks that nuclear exchange is more likely now than it was twenty years ago, as the fear of nuclear weapons exploding in the atmosphere becomes a more and more distant memory. Still, he predicts that “the next mega-event would be cyber, or a combination of cyber and something else”. Warning that we’ve only seen cyber-attacks in their infancy, Kaplan notes that it may not be possible to identify the perpetrator of such an attack immediately, so the response may be problematic. Similarly, he thinks that the chances of the US starting a war have increased too, as the policy decision-making process in the executive under President Trump appears to have partially broken down. As he puts it, a war could happen “because of a breakdown in the decision-making process, an impulsive statement or act by the president that could create a nightmare.”

# Redrawing Europe

## Europe is imploding because of populism

Amidst widespread populist backlash to globalization, the elites have a great problem in the West as they can no longer persuade their electorates about the direction of their countries. Kaplan singles out France, Hungary, Poland, Great Britain and the US as countries that are facing a crisis of the elites. As he puts it, “elites think that they have all the answers and are very prone to groupthink, but they are unable to ask for sacrifices from their populations”. According to Kaplan, this is demonstrated in the high debt levels in the developed world, i.e. in the US and almost every European country. And debt is amassed when democracies can no longer ask for sac-

rifices from their own people. French President Emmanuel Macron is also suffering from the same malaise of the elites; hence Kaplan doesn't think

that he can regenerate or reinvent Europe: “He is as much part of the French elite as Chirac, Hollande, and others. He won an election because his opponent was mired in a scandal.”

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Ultimately, Kaplan thinks that Europe will depend on what happens in Germany, which he views as the major demographic, economic and political power in the heart of Europe, looking both to the West and to the East. As he puts it, for decades, every German Chancellor has been very much in the mold of Konrad Adenauer—especially Angela Merkel, who grew up in East Germany, speaks Russian and has a deep memory of the Cold War. The question then is: Will the Adenauer model continue? If it doesn't, Kaplan warns that "Germany could become more nationalist, more isolationist, more selfish in many ways."

## Europe's southern border is not the Mediterranean but the Sahara Desert

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Europe is dissolving on the outside. It's back to traditional geography, with all the instability that that brings.”

Kaplan argues that the most critical point in understanding Europe was made by top French geographer Fernand Braudel in the mid-20th century, who said that Europe's southern border is not the Mediterranean but the Sahara Desert, meaning that North Africa, the Levant, the Eastern Mediterranean, were all historically parts of Europe. Kaplan argues that we forgot that history during the long Cold War years, when the whole Arab world was locked up in prison states and there was no migration to Europe and the Soviet Union. Isolated, Europe could develop "the boring good life" during the Cold War. But now Europe is again besieged from all corners of the Mediterranean, from Russia, it's become part of Eurasia: "In that sense, Europe is dissolving on the outside. It's back to traditional geography, with all the instability that that brings," says Kaplan. Geography is particularly relevant in the Eastern Mediterranean, which is also part of that greater Europe. He notes that the natural gas finds is a new development that is redefining the region, bringing together countries which "one would never have thought would be working well together": Egypt, Israel, Greece, Cyprus. He adds that the Eastern Mediterranean is also part of China's Belt and Road Initiative, noting that "it's not just the Piraeus port; it's also Naples in Italy, right up to Duisburg in Germany: this is the Western extension of Belt and Road for China." Combined with the underwater gas pipelines, the region will be totally transformed, increasing its strategic significance.

## Meanwhile, the Middle East had been left to its own devices

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The Chinese Belt and Road Initiative is principally about Iran, as it aims to link China with Iran through Central Asia.”

The lack of a clear signal from the US in the Middle East is, according to Kaplan, contributing to a changing landscape in a region that marked the collapse of virtually all imperial systems: the Ottoman Turkish empire, the British and French mandate system, the Soviet empire—which in reality collapsed in 1991. Even though Russia has made some sort of a comeback, it's still not the way it was in the '70s and '80s, Kaplan

notes. And then, there's been the erosion of American power since the Iraq war. Kaplan is concerned that the Middle East has been left to its own devices—and has no illusions about what this means: Regional powers are rising and challenging each other. As he notes, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey are much more aggressive now than they were 20 years ago. Iran is particularly important as “the central demographic and economic organizing principle of the entire Middle East, because it borders not just one but two hydrocarbon-rich zones, including the Caspian Sea.” Hence, Kaplan thinks that the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative is principally about Iran, as it aims to link China with Iran through Central Asia. He warns that China and Iran is an unbeatable combination in Eurasia that sidelines the Russians, and that China has the geographical advantage over the US due to its geographic proximity to the region.

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Turkey “is potentially more unstable than it's ever been since the years following WWI and the ascension of Ataturk”.

### But the big question is what happens in Turkey

In the past, says Kaplan, an oscillation between short-term military rule and long-term democratic rule

made Turkey sufficiently stable and predictable. Currently, however, President Erdogan has emasculated the military and his rule is becoming increasingly unenlightened and semi-authoritarian. Hence, it's harder for anyone to predict where this might



lead: Will it peter out to some election he loses and goes away, or will it become far messier?

There's no doubt in Kaplan's mind that Turkey has already drifted away from the West. The question for him is if it can come back half-way. The chances don't look good. Kaplan notes that Erdogan is a great admirer of Putin and dependent on Russian gas. At the same time, he has over-extended himself in the Middle East, where "he thought that he could execute a neo-Ottoman semi-imperial strategy in Northern Syria and elsewhere, but it turns out that he doesn't have the capacity to do that neatly." Still, there is no easy way out for Erdogan, as he has no exit strategy domestically. And because of the Kurdish issue, Kaplan is of the opinion that Turkey "is potentially more unstable than it's ever been since the years following WWI and the ascension of Ataturk".

## The only "sure route" for the Balkans to escape their history is the EU umbrella

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The real victims of the weakening of the EU over the last decade have been in Central Eastern and Southeast Europe more so than in Western Europe”

The Balkans is a region where the necessity of the EU is most pronounced. Kaplan has argued that the EU is an imperial system like China or the US, but in his mind, it is a necessary one, especially for the Western Balkans. Based on his analysis, countries like Serbia and Montenegro have been "weakly governed, weakly institutionalized, badly run states", with differences with each other, and their only definite hope to solve their problems is to turn away from ethnic nationalism under the umbrella of the EU. Kaplan indeed warns that if the EU does not expand in the Western Balkans, these countries will always be in trouble.

Nevertheless, the EU does not appear to have any desire for enlargement in the region at this time: "This is why I say that the real victims of the weakening of the EU over the last decade have been in Central Eastern and Southeast Europe more so than in Western Europe," Kaplan says. From his viewpoint, the will and need of the Western Balkans was that the EU would expand and be strong and vibrant; thus, solutions in Kosovo and elsewhere would become much easier, they would become almost natural and organic. That said, Kaplan does not see a risk of an Albanian-Serbian conflict. He shares the view that Russia and Turkey are competing for influence in North Macedonia and elsewhere in the region. "It is only the Germans who are keeping them out," he says, because of the power of the German economy extending deep into Southeast Europe.

## Greece will have a better century than the last one, if only it gets better governance

Kaplan, who was based in Greece for seven years during the '80s, maintains that Greece will hopefully have a better century than the last one. He notes that Greece

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Greece has the most magnificent geography in the world for a variety of reasons, and it has stores of talent. The problem has always been governance, tax laws, administration”

is always the center of the world for him because “it’s equidistant between Europe, the Eastern Mediterranean, Russia, and North Africa, and it’s a great litmus test of where the world is going”. Geography can be an asset, and it’s certainly not what is holding Greece back, to his mind. Asked if he sees much change in the country, he notes that “Greece has the most magnificent geography in the world for a variety of

reasons, and it has stores of talent. The problem has always been governance, tax laws, administration. That’s where the problem has been; it’s governance,

not geography.”

The 20th century was a mildly tragic one for Greece, Kaplan notes, as the country never lived up to its potential. Governments were disappointing in what they delivered, even under the best Prime Ministers. Yet he sees some hope in the new generation: “This conference would be unimaginable 35 years ago when I lived in Greece, because the Greek branch of the global elite simply did not exist in the sense that it does today. So, this is where there’s hope.” This is a new century, he says, and leaves on a positive note, with an important if not all too familiar caveat: With the right kind of governmental reforms, there are no limits to what Greece can do, given its geographical situation in the naval age that we’re just entering. ■

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The interview of Robert D. Kaplan with Alexis Papahelas was decoded by Katerina Sokou.

Katerina Sokou is the Washington DC correspondent for SKAI TV and Greek daily newspaper Kathimerini, where she is also a columnist, focusing on transatlantic relations, US foreign policy and financial diplomacy. She is a nonresident Senior Fellow at the Atlantic Council with the Future Europe Initiative, focusing on Greece’s role in its region. Before that, she was a visiting scholar at George Washington University’s Elliott School of International Affairs, researched the U.S. role in the Greek debt crisis, and a member of the editorial board of the Washington-based European Institute. Katerina Sokou majored in History at the University of Ioannina and holds postgraduate degrees in International Studies from Warwick University and in Journalism from Columbia University, where she was a Knight-Bagehot Fellow in Economics and Business Journalism. ■



## Robert D. Kaplan

Author; Managing Director,  
Eurasia Group, USA

**Robert D. Kaplan** is the bestselling author of eighteen books on foreign affairs and travel translated into many languages, including *The Return of Marco Polo's World*, *In Europe's Shadow*, *Asia's Cauldron*, *The Revenge of Geography*, *Monsoon*, *The Coming Anarchy*, and *Balkan Ghosts*. He is a managing director at *Eurasia Group*, the world's premier political risk consultancy.

For three decades he reported on foreign affairs for *The Atlantic*. He was chief geopolitical analyst at Stratfor, a visiting professor at the United States Naval Academy, a senior fellow at the Center for a New American Security, and a member of the Pentagon's Defense Policy Board, appointed by Secretary of Defense Robert Gates. He is currently a member of the U. S. Navy's Executive Panel. *Foreign Policy* magazine twice named him one of the world's "Top 100 Global Thinkers."

*New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman has called Kaplan among the four "most widely read" authors defining the post-Cold War (along with Stanford Professor Francis Fukuyama, Yale Professor Paul Kennedy, and the late Harvard Professor Samuel Huntington). Kaplan's article, "The Coming Anarchy," published in the February 1994 *Atlantic Monthly*, about how population rise, ethnic and sectarian strife, disease, urbanization, and resource depletion is undermining the political fabric of the planet, was hotly debated in foreign-language translations around the world. So, was his December 1997 *Atlantic* cover story, "Was Democracy Just A Moment?" That piece argued that the democracy now spreading around the world would not necessarily lead to more stability. According to *U. S. News & World Report*, "President Clinton was so impressed with Kaplan, he ordered an interagency study of these issues, and it agreed with Kaplan's conclusions."

In the 1980s, Kaplan was the first American writer to warn in print about a future war in the Balkans. *Balkan Ghosts* was chosen by *The New York Times Book Review* as one of the "best books" of 1993. *The Arabists*, *The Ends of the Earth*, *An Empire Wilderness*, *Eastward to Tartary*, and *Warrior Politics* were all chosen by *The*

*New York Times* as "notable" books of the year. *An Empire Wilderness* was chosen by *The Washington Post* and *The Los Angeles Times* as one of the best books of 1998. *The Wall Street Journal* named *The Arabists* one of the five best books ever written about America's historical involvement in the Middle East. *The Financial Times* named *Asia's Cauldron* one of the ten best political books of 2014.

Besides *The Atlantic*, Kaplan's essays have appeared on the editorial pages of *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *the Financial Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *The Los Angeles Times*, as well as in all the major foreign affairs journals, including cover stories in *Foreign Affairs*. He has been a consultant to the U. S. Army's Special Forces Regiment, the U. S. Air Force, and the U. S. Marines. He has lectured at military war colleges, the FBI, the National Security Agency, the Pentagon's Joint Staff, the Defense Intelligence Agency, the CIA, major universities, and global business forums. He has briefed presidents, secretaries of state, and defense secretaries, Kaplan has delivered the Secretary of State's Open Forum Lecture at the U. S. State Department. He has reported from over 100 countries. Two earlier books of his, *Soldiers of God: With Islamic Warriors in Afghanistan and Pakistan*, and *Surrender or Starve: Travels in Ethiopia, Sudan, Somalia and Eritrea*, have been re-issued, so that all his books are in print.

In 2004, Kaplan was given the Distinguished Alumni Award by the University of Connecticut. In 2009, he was given the Benjamin Franklin Public Service Award by the Foreign Policy Research Institute in Philadelphia.

Robert D. Kaplan was born June 23, 1952 in New York City. He graduated in 1973 from the University of Connecticut, where he was the features editor of the *Connecticut Daily Campus*. In 1973 and 1974 he traveled throughout Communist Eastern Europe and parts of the Near East. From 1974 to 1975 he was a reporter for the *Rutland Daily Herald* in Vermont. In 1975, he left the United States to travel throughout the Arab and Mediterranean worlds, beginning a period of 16 years living overseas. He served a year in the Israel Defense Forces and lived for nine years in Greece and Portugal. He has been married to Maria Cabral since 1983. They live in the Berkshires in western Massachusetts. They have one son, Michael, who is married with a daughter and works for an investment bank in Boston. ■



## Alexis Papahelas

Executive Editor,  
Kathimerini Newspaper,  
Greece

Born in Athens in 1961, [Alexis Papahelas](#) studied History and Economics at Bard College and received a Master's in International Affairs and Journalism at Columbia University. Until 1998 he worked as a U.S., correspondent

for various newspapers, television and radio networks. He returned to Greece in 1998 and co-anchored the respected news magazine «Mavro Kouti», broadcasted by MEGA Channel and worked as a senior editor for the newspaper «To Vima».

From 2000 until 2014, Alexis Papahelas was the leading presenter of television show «The Files» at SKAI TV

Channel. Among other leading personalities he has interviewed U.S. Presidents George Bush Sr. Bill Clinton and Barack Obama, former U.S. Secretaries of State Hillary Clinton, Colin Powell and Madeleine Albright, the late Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, Turkey's Prime Minister Erdogan, George Soros and Bill Gates.

He is now the Editor-in-Chief of "Kathimerini", the leading newspaper of Athens and a presenter of the "Stories" Television news program. He is also the Secretary General of the Hellenic Foundation for European & Foreign Policy, the main Greek think tank. Alexis Papahelas was named as one of the most influential Europeans for 2015 by POLITICO. He is the author of two books, "the Rape of Greek Democracy" which focuses on the US role in Greek politics in the 1960's and "November 17", a book about the notorious Greek terrorist organization. ■





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