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Community

White House Meeting With Diaspora Leaders Brought Enthusiasm Tempered With Realism

SUNDAY, AUGUST 9, 2015 | BY CONSTANTINE S. SIRIGOS | 0 COMMENT



The National Herald obtained the perspectives of a number of participants in the meeting of Diaspora leaders with senior White House officials of the Obama Administration to discuss issues relevant to Greece.

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NEW YORK – Important endeavors have a stream of causes, and the White House meeting between top administration officials and community leaders on August 6 is no exception.

While the details of the discussion were off the record, The National Herald obtained the perspectives of a number of participants.

All noted it was a beginning, not an end – more meetings are expected – and there signs an important new chapter was opened both in the community's relations with Washington and in the way the community conducts its business.

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After the phrase “first step” the words that came up most frequently were “Follow up.”

Asked about the next steps, Fr. Alex Karloutsos told TNH “That is open to the Administration. They perceive this to be a long-term relationship because they want to stand beside Greece as it goes through its difficulties.”

A senior Obama administration official said the meeting was about “how we can work together to help the government and people of Greece emerge from the current crisis,” and everyone TNH spoke to was impressed with Vice President Joe Biden.

Real Estate Magnate George Marcus told TNH, “I was as very impressed with the administration, They are on top of it, they know all the details, they are communicating on all sides and doing everything they can to help Greece, and the Greek-Americans were very knowledgeable and engaged, who would love the chance to show young Greeks.”

Asked if anyone suggested getting Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras to call for a “tough love” summit of Diaspora business leaders so he could hear from them what they need to see before investing in Greece, Marcus said, “It was not discussed exactly in those terms, but people like (former California State Treasurer Phil) Angelides and I think Michael Dukakis have had hour-long telephone conversations with Tsipras,” already.

He said his contribution to the discussion was to say, “This meeting is all well and good ... but the only way this is going to work is if we have a working group of three or four Greek-American leaders and a working group of administration people and we meet monthly or even weekly and we get things progressing in Greece and the EU.”

He said he will email some of the participants and urge them to form a three-person group to meet on a bi-weekly basis “to see what we can do and communicate to the Diaspora on what they can do.”

When there’s an agreement between the administration and the coordinating group of the Diaspora, they can delegate different things to different people ... I am sure they are all willing to help – as long as there is some realistic movement on the Greek restructuring.” Another common refrain.

Former Ambassador Eleni Tsakopoulos Kounalakis said the White House has been engaged and concerned from the beginning but the timing of the meeting was important because “things seem to be hitting the critical point now.”

The deal Greece is currently negotiating with the Troika remains onerous and not focused enough on economic stimulus, Kounalakis said, adding, “It’s clear ... there is going to have to be some way to make that agreement sustainable ... that will be in the form of debt restructuring.”

Marcus, a fellow Californian, told TNH that while everyone knows the deal is flawed, “The Greeks must show they are serious about putting their house in order.”

Kounalakis also made an appeal to the people who were not in the room but whose efforts are also crucial.

“As the crisis deepens, so does the need for people to get off the sidelines and get involved and help on the humanitarian side and help identify U.S. government programs available to stimulate the Greek economy and provide humanitarian aid,” she said.

She said Greek-Americans can help by exploring investment opportunities and donating to effective humanitarian organizations.

She noted there are State Department programs for sending out experts to train young entrepreneurs, and to show civil servants how to be more responsive to citizens’ needs.

John Galanis, AHEPA's Supreme President, was unable to attend, but lent the organization's full support, sending [Andrew Kaffes](#) to represent him.

"AHEPA sincerely appreciates the high level of engagement by United States government officials to address the crisis in Greece and its outreach to Capitol Hill and the community on the crisis," said Kaffes, who offered policy suggestions that could possibly assist with tourism and humanitarian aid.

"The discussion itself was straightforward, insightful, and substantive, and I was encouraged to learn about certain issue areas the administration is looking to address, particularly migration," Kaffes said.

Angelides said, "The meeting was very productive...it lasted more than two hours and there were high-level people, so it was very clear that the recovery and stability of Greece alliance are very important to this administration and all of us are grateful for the efforts of the President on behalf of Greece.

"The purpose of the meeting was to talk about how we can work together to assist Greece on the road to economic recovery ... an important first step – not an end – a beginning of a process and we committed ourselves regularize our communications," with the White House and among the Greek-Americans.

"It will be an ongoing dialogue and process," he said, "a mutual commitment that we would find a practical way to work together rather than just have one meeting and to move from discussion to concrete progress."

Angelides said with urgency, "We have to sort out in the next few days" who would be the small group interfacing with the government's working group.

Hotelier and developer George Tsunis, who is also a top Democrat fundraiser, said that, "Clearly the administration was seeking input from the Diaspora on what assistance the U.S. could give Greece to help them carry out economic reforms and help with the economic stability of Greece, including efforts to encourage more private investment in Greece ... we must go forward now and identify five people to be a steering committee."

Angelides summed up the participants' feelings when he said, "The fact the Vice President of the United States, and the President's Chief of Staff, with all they have on their plate ... carved out the time for an extensive conversation shows the administration cares deeply," is impressive.

"Greece matters to the United States, and not just on a geopolitical basis but on a historical basis – it's a reminder that it's a very special relationship," and then emphasized: "It's time to get our act together and begin to develop plans and then engage in ways that are productive for Greece and its economy."

Imagination goes a long way, and the Diaspora's top businessperson thrive on innovation. "A year ago the State Department asked me to go to help Greek business people," Marcus told TNH about an event he attended. "It was really remarkable . I spoke to 25 different people in different industries."

Let the brainstorming begin.



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