

Calling all Greeks abroad

MEET the new head of the foreign ministry's general secretariat for Greeks abroad. Petros Panayiotopoulos, a veteran diplomat, is now in charge of bolstering ties between Greece and Greeks living and working abroad.

Amid an economic crisis, this is probably one of the toughest jobs ever assigned to head this office since it was established some 28 years ago. An optimistic Panayiotopoulos is certain the economic crisis won't stand in his way.

It is the first time that a diplomat has been appointed to this general secretariat, he said. Up to now, a political figure was always appointed. The importance of appointing a diplomat is something that the current government understands very well.

Foreign Minister Stavros Lambrinidis once served as the general secretariat for Greeks abroad, as has Deputy Foreign Minister Dimitris Doulis, a Greek Australian. And let's not forget our prime minister, George Papandreou, has lived abroad and has experienced the life of the Greek diaspora, Panayiotopoulos added.

He estimates that as many as seven million people of Greek descent reside permanently abroad. The number includes second- and third-generation immigrants.

Panayiotopoulos, who describes the country's relationship with the diaspora as affectionate, is now gearing up for the gathering of the World Council of Greeks Abroad (SAE) in Thessaloniki in September. This high-profile event, expected to be one of the biggest gatherings of Greeks from all over the world, will be addressed by the prime minister.

What is the role of the Greek diaspora?

Petros Panayiotopoulos: I think it should be to contribute, assist and support the country in difficult times. And this is exactly what is going on. The general secretariat for Greeks abroad offers grants to diaspora organisations. The response this year has been that organisations are requesting very small amounts to continue with their work to promote Greek culture abroad.

They should serve as our country's top ambassadors. They should be ready to promote our country's national interest - I am not talking about party politics. We recently welcomed Greeks who are government ministers, senators and other leading politicians around the world during the meeting of the World Hellenic Inter-Parliamentarian Association here in Athens. They are prime examples of Greeks who have integrated into their new homeland. And believe me, there is no better advocate for Greek interests abroad than politicians who are of Greek descent.

What's the biggest issue today?

There are many issues that we are addressing. One of the most important ones has to do with Greek language education abroad. Our alternate education minister, Fofi Yennimata, recently tabled a new bill which we also helped draft. The aim of the new law is for the Greek language to finally attain the status it deserves abroad. It would be a shame if we did not do this.

We can't rely on others. There are some small Greek associations abroad who are trying to sell this to members

of the community. This is something we should change. Why not train the children of the diaspora to teach the language in mainstream schools. This is what we want.

How do you plan to do this?

We can use bilateral agreements to make sure that second-generation Greeks are the ones employed to teach the language. The Greek Language Centre based in Thessaloniki could grant certification to the teachers.

In the past, former education ministers - all victims of the clientelist state - sent Greek teachers abroad to teach in countries where they did not even speak the language of that country.

As regards the Greek schools abroad, these should become bilingual. The monolingual [Greek] schools in Germany, for instance, have been producing students who do not fit in anywhere - not in Germany and not even in Greece.

Australia took a big step recently and made Greek one of the official foreign languages being taught at public schools. We are grateful to the Australian government for this and also the Greek Australian associations and organisations, as well as the Greek Orthodox Church, which worked very hard to achieve this. The result was extraordinary. And we want this to be repeated in other countries.

What about the long awaited overseas ballot bill sunk in parliament back in 2009?

The government is looking for the right formula. We can always find ways



for Greeks abroad to gain a voice. No new bill is in the works. Believe me, it is so complicated. It needs time.

Apart from selling the so-called diaspora bonds, how else can Greeks abroad help the country out of the financial crisis?

There is the solidarity fund opened by the parliament for the repayment of the country's debt. This is something embraced by Greeks abroad. There are also plans - based on a proposal by members of the Greek diaspora - to air an advertisement on Greek satellite television stations abroad. This announcement will say something like Give five dollars for Greece. Money can be raised. What's five dollars? If this were to happen once a month, believe me we could raise a significant amount of money. It's not a charity collection. It's more like a show of solidarity and assistance.

Few Greeks would consider investing in Greece, survey says

A MAJORITY of Greeks in the United States, Canada, Australia and across Europe say they love Greece but wouldn't ever consider living here, according to the findings of a global survey commissioned by the foreign ministry in 2009. Billed as the biggest poll of its kind, the research conducted by Athens-based Kapa Research and Harvard University's Centre for Hellenic Studies found that 78 percent of first- and second-generation Greeks abroad consider themselves to be Greek above all else. Two-thirds said they are proud to be Greek and 67 percent said they try to preserve their Greek heritage and want the same for their children. What's more, the ties to Greece go beyond an emotional connection. Two-thirds of respondents said they own property in Greece.

However, only a quarter said they have thought about investing their money here, mainly due to Greece's reputation for having a grinding bureaucracy. Red tape is the reason cited by 49 percent of respondents who said they would probably never consider investing in Greece.

About 20 percent said they believe investing in their country of residence is safer, while 18 percent said they are not aware of the investment opportunities Greece has to offer.

Kouros figures regain shape at Despotiko

Arare type of archaic kouros sculpture has recently been discovered on the uninhabited islet of Despotiko just west of Antiparos, according to a statement released July 18 by the culture and tourism ministry.

Archaeological investigation of the site of Mantra Despotikou, directed since 1997 by Yiannis Kouragios of the Greek 21st Ephorate of Prehistoric and Classical Antiquities, has revealed a sanctuary dedicated to the god Apollo and possibly his sister Artemis.

The latest campaign, between June 2 and July 8, has succeeded in further clarifying the occupational history of the sanctuary, especially its South Complex and main temple. A particularly exciting find in 2011 is the headless torso of a male kouros figure which had been cut at the waist and reused as part of a large threshold. Only the third known example of its type, the figure has his left arm folded across his chest - a characteristic of late 6th century BC Parian workshops.

Numerous kouros fragments have been found previously on the site, including a lower torso in 2005 and a head in 2010 that

now appear to match the upper torso uncovered this year. The left leg of a life-sized kouros also excavated in 2011 has similarly been determined to match a leg fragment previously found in 2005.

Ceramic evidence confirms the existence of the sanctuary since Geometric times. Excavation under the marble-slatted dining hall of the sanctuary also brought to light a sacred pit (bothros), 1.5m square, that investigators have dated to the mid-6th century BC.

