

An Overview

American Hellenic Institute's Student Foreign Policy Trip to Greece & Cyprus

By Aspasia Bartell, former Maids of Athena District Liaison and former President of the Seattle chapter. Current MBA student at the Foster School of Business at the University of Washington.

This summer I had the opportunity to attend a tremendous program, the American Hellenic Institute's (AHI) Student Foreign Policy trip to Washington DC, Greece, and Cyprus. The American Hellenic Institute is a Washington DC based Greek-American lobbying organization and think tank that lobbies for the issues that affect the Greek-American community. Each year they lead a student foreign policy trip with the purpose of increasing the knowledge of young-adult Greek-Americans on the issues our community faces today.

The trip was led by Nick Larigakis, AHI executive director, who took us to multiple briefings with high-level officials in DC, Nicosia, and Athens. Our trip began at the blue and white AHI Hellenic House in downtown DC with a briefing by Mr. Larigakis and Mr. Karambelas (AHI volunteer legal counsel) the briefing consisted of a quick, but thorough summary of Modern Greek history as well as a summary of the current policy issues and economic situation Greece is facing. After this briefing, we knew that due to the economic crisis and its ripple effects, we would be visiting at a pivotal time in modern Greek history. Being in Athens during this time of turmoil along with the unique opportunity to be briefed by and ask questions of high level dignitaries, would make this trip an experience we would never forget

The next few days consisted of a whirlwind of briefings which took place all over Washington DC: at the Greek and Cypriot embassies, the Center for Strategic and International Studies, and the state department. Topics included the Cyprus problem, the Greek economic crisis, the FYROM name issue, relations with Turkey, and Greece's EU membership. We left Washington DC intrigued and wanting to learn more.

After arriving in Cyprus, our first visit was to the Ledra street viewpoint of the buffer zone that divides the capital city of Nicosia (also known as Lefkosia). Our tour guide took us inside a dusty, empty and abandoned hotel that lies inside the buffer zone. The building looked like it had been frozen in time. We walked up the depreciated stairs to the upper balcony. From this viewpoint, to our left we overlooked the Greek portion of Cyprus, and to our right we saw the Turkish flag dotted landscape of occupied northern Cyprus.

The rest of the week was made up of meeting after meeting with numerous Cypriot officials. These included



Aspasia Bartell with Mr. Ioannins Vrailas, Deputy Chief of Mission and now an EU ambassador to the UN.



Aspasia Bartell with Mr. Nick Larigakis (left), AHI President and Mr. Andreas Kakouris (right), Minister Plenipotentiary, Director of the office of the Minister of Foreign Affairs and former Cypriot ambassador to the US.

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briefings by Ms. Eleni Mavrou the Mayor of Nicosia, Mr. Andreas Kakouris, the Minister Plenipotentiary, Director of the office of the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mr. Yiannakis Omirou, President of Parliament, Amb. Frank Urbancic, the Ambassador of the U.S. to Cyprus, and Mr. George Iacovou, the Presidential Commissioner. Each meeting added further detail to our understanding of Cyprus today, and how the 1974 Turkish invasion continues to impact and haunt the daily lives of Cypriots 37 years later. There are still hundreds of missing persons, thousands of Greek-Cypriots who lost their homes and businesses, and a UN patrolled buffer zone dividing both the country and the capital city.

For years Cypriots have wanted a resolution that would unify the island. AHI stands firm and works tirelessly to bring the fact that the current status of Cyprus is a violation of international law to the attention of Washington politicians, while highlighting the strategic importance of the Cyprus to the US.

The Cyprus problem was not new to us, many of us had grown up hearing stories from our grandparents, parents, and community members. However there is nothing like seeing the occupied area first hand. Our driver, George, is Greek Cypriot whose family was forced to leave their home in northern Cyprus as a result of the invasion. He drove us past his family home, of which is now occupied by Turkish settlers. He then showed us a number of desecrated churches and cemeteries. Our intelligent, upbeat, and very talkative group was silent.

Our next stop was the town of Famagusta. Described as a ghost town, Famagusta is an area that was gated off and left frozen in time by the Turkish invaders. We walked by shells of high-rise hotels and old style Greek homes riddled with bullet holes. It is plain to see that there was a Greek-Cypriot community, businesses, a thriving tourist industry, and a major port at that very site 37 years ago.

Despite the tangles that still exist in the international political sphere, the Cypriot economy is doing quite well and the country has become a magnet for foreign direct investment. According to the Mayor of Nicosia (the capital and business center of Cyprus), Eleni Mavrou, the division of the island serves as a hindrance to economic growth. She went on to predict the occurrence of a bigger boom if a solid resolution is found and the island is re-unified.

Our experience in Cyprus was exceptional, and our time in Athens proved to be as well.

We arrived in central Athens the day before the vote of confidence in Prime Minister Papandreou took place. Walking up the shattered marble steps of our hotel, we couldn't help but look over to the tent filled, banner ridden Syntagma square.

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Aspasia Bartell with Dr. Miranda Xafa, Alternate Executive Director at the Board of the International Monetary Fund.



Our delegation.



Aspasia Bartell with Dr. Karolos Papoulias, the President of Greece.

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In Greece we met with numerous officials including representatives from the ministry of foreign affairs, an IMF economist, parliament members and President Papoulias.

While the economic situation was at the forefront of most of our briefings, officials at the ministry of foreign affairs stressed the fact that other policy issues are still pressing. The FYROM name issue is still a huge concern due to fears of land annexation plans and protection of our cultural heritage due to the recent installment of a large statue in Skopje resembling Alexander the great. In addition, relations with Turkey continue to be a concern that is further deepened due to an increasing number of Turkish fly overs inside Greek airspace.

We had a meeting with six members of parliament who stressed that Greece needs foreign direct investment now more than ever. They also expressed concern about image issues in the international media as a result of the protests. In addition, they emphasized the importance of American support on the FYROM name issue, issues with Turkey, and the resolution of the Cyprus problem.

We also met with Miranda Xafa, Alternate Executive Director at the Board of the International Monetary Fund, who explained the economic crisis further in depth. She pointed out that Greece has taken out the largest loan in the history of humanity. She discussed how investments and exports will be key moving to forward and that Greece should take a thorough look at the size of its public sector.

We later met with Spiros Millionas, Chairman of Ionian Management. He gave us an inspiring talk, about how he started out and built his shipping business. He reminded us of the drive and ambition that our culture imparts on us and that we as Greek Americans have it in us to do great things.

We were fortunate to meet with, Dr. Karolos Papoulias, President of Greece. President Papoulias utilized our visit as opportunity to thank President Obama for his political help with the financial crisis. He ended our meeting with a powerful message that the Greek people pose an incredible amount of strength and ambition and they will emerge from this crisis.

This trip is phenomenal and I highly recommend it to all Greek-American college students. AHI understands the importance of ensuring the next generation of Greek-American leaders is well informed of the issues facing our community. Nick Larigakis and the AHI staff and Volunteers are the voice of our community in Washington. They fight for these issues as well as ensure they are not forgotten. For more information about the Student Foreign Policy trip visit ahiworld.com

You can help AHI fight for the rule of law in Cyprus. Visit the AHI website, become a member, lobby your congressmen. AHI needs our help in pressuring the US government to exert pressure on Turkey and enforce International law in the Cyprus issue. For more information about AHI and a guide on how to help in the fight, visit the AHI website and become an active member!