

The importance of the Greek community abroad for Greece



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evolution of the Greek nation throughout its history, and the importance of reinforcing the ties between our country and the Greek communities abroad.

In its long history, our homeland has experienced large waves of emigration that have at the same time created extended and significant Diaspora networks connecting them with the motherland. Not all of these networks were as important or carried the same weight. All of them however, until recently at least, built strong ties and interacted significantly with their homeland, both economically and culturally.

From the 11th century BCE to 1500 CE, migration waves, whether small or large (Ionia, Greater Greece, the Black Sea and Mediterranean coastlands, expansion during the Hellenistic years, dispersion after the Fall of Constantinople etc.) were critical as global channels transferring and shaping world science and culture.

In the course of the second great wave of migration, from about 1500 to the end of the 19th century, the Greeks were engaged in creating extensive commercial and economic networks with Europe, Russia, and the Middle East inside and outside the Ottoman Empire. With a huge difference however, as instead of exporters of science and culture they were now importers. It is thus difficult to understand the developments pertaining to our national liberation struggle if we do not understand the role of Greek scholars in Europe during the Enlightenment, as it is similarly difficult to understand the establishment and operation of the Modern Greek state minus the introduction of European ideas and practices imported by Diaspora Greeks.

In the third period of emigration, from the years of the Crrant Crisis of the late 19th century up to the mid-1960's, the importance of the Greek Diaspora lied mainly in its economic role, as in the support of family back home but also through important donations by major organizations such as the prominent American-Hellenic Educational Progressive Society (AHEPA), which has at various times carried out major charity work in Greece, especially in the health sector, including the construction of the hospital with same name (AHEPA) in Thessaloniki in 1950. And of course, the contribution of the Diaspora was decisive over time in balancing the country's persistent external deficit through remittances sent back home by expatriates.

Recent years, since the 1990s and 2000s but especially during the economic crisis, have marked the escalation phase of the 'brain drain', when emigration attained new characteristics. Although any assessment of recent trends is premature at this stage, we can discern elements that perhaps drastically differentiate this phase from previous ones: firstly, in the increased human capital of migrant outflows, especially compared to the previous period, and secondly, in the substantial absence of any positive domestic effects from the last wave of emigration, since the flight abroad does not feed back into the Greek economy in any way but merely removes valuable human and material resources. For the first time perhaps in the course of this very long relationship between the motherland and the Diaspora, there are signs of interruption of the cultural and economic interaction between them.

Thus, we are at risk of seeing the recent outflow of skilled human resources becoming a completely negative trend, both from a cultural and economic point of view, breaking thus with the millennia long tradition by which emigration and the wider diffusion of expatriate Greeks was also associated with an important positive feedback to the home

country. Indeed, this risk exists precisely because this last wave of Greek emigrants includes very rich human capital, while the Greek Diaspora as a whole is financially very strong and influential in ways valuable to the national benefit.

So once again we have to ask the question that often seems to be forgotten: Why should we deal with the Greek Diaspora? What will the country gain? The answer is rather obvious, if one considers the relatively reliable estimates that some 8 million Greeks currently live and operate outside our national borders, who have either moved away recently or have been living and prospering in other countries for generations. If we succeed in strengthening the involvement of our expatriates in the economic and cultural life of Greece, and if we improve the connection between them as well as with the motherland, we shall gain in many ways including growth, expand our economic base and by extension our geopolitical strength.

Numbers aside, it's an issue of a quality as well. As we know, expatriate Greeks, wherever to be found, have with hard work over the years achieved excellence and prominence in politics, business, and academic life. That said, we shouldn't be indifferent even if they were simply unskilled workers. The qualitative status of the Greek Diaspora however demands that we set more ambitious goals.

In any case, the significance of the Diaspora is not something peculiar to Greece. The instrumental role Diasporas could play in the motherland's economic, political, and cultural affairs is something now universally recognized; Over the last 20 years in particular, many countries and governments have been active in reinforcing these beneficial ties with their Diaspora, even setting up Ministries responsible for them. This significant increase in Diaspora structures coincides with the era of globalization, strongly suggesting that globalization is not in a zero-sum relationship with national identities but in a reciprocal feedback relationship, highlighting thus the significance of Diaspora networks. Our country unfortunately has not yet done much in this area, establishing structures and networks that would connect expatriates with the motherland, despite having one of the world's most prolific and qualitative Diasporas worldwide.

From a narrow economic point of view, international literature and practice points indicate that attracting foreign direct investment in a country relies heavily on low-hanging fruit. As the Diaspora is much more familiar than foreign investors with the home country, it is able to overcome uncertainties and risks that foreigners deem insuperable and make business decisions easier, carry out investments by transferring technology and making good use of networking, which in any other case would have been difficult or impossible. Moreover, it could attract investors through its partnerships in the countries in which it operates. It could in other words become a 'good conductor', an ambassador of the business opportunities that are currently being developed in Greece for foreign investors in other countries.

The absolutely desirable economic activation of the Diaspora however cannot be realized through exclusively 'narrow' economic considerations and without the complex chain of relations and bonds with the motherland, family ties, as well as local, religious, cultural and of course national. All these ties should be cultivated with care, and of course the role of the state should be supportive at every level. We already have examples where Greek communities abroad themselves organize Greek language

classes for those of Greek descent and bring them to Greece for short periods of time to learn Greek and to get to know Greece, including the special places of origin of their ancestors. These commendable efforts of the Greek community to remain attached to their homeland should not only be appreciated but reinforced in any possible way, be it material, institutional and symbolic.

To give an example of what can be done in this direction, it is worth mentioning a specific policy relating to the Greek Diaspora that is already in place since 2017: It is the "Bridges of Knowledge and Cooperation" Initiative (<https://www.knowledgebridges.gr/>), a policy aimed at the skilled human resources working abroad, recognizing that a significant number of those who left as part of the 'brain drain' will remain abroad for at least some time. This initiative seeks to create an online community of all Greek scientists, no matter which country they live in, and connect them with the Greek economy in real and feasible ways. This initiative is not limited to those who left the country in the recent years of the crisis. It is equally addressed to older generations of emigrants and the Greek Diaspora living and working abroad, as an additional channel for strengthening their relationship with their motherland. The creation of international networks of expatriates, businessmen and academics by means of new technologies can contribute decisively to many of the above economic aspects of the association between expatriate Greeks and Greece.

Let us not forget, therefore, the historically important role played by the Diaspora, and not just the Greek one, making it a huge comparative advantage for those countries that have it and utilize its potential - but also a bleeding wound if it remains untapped. We are hence urged to re-integrate and make the most of the Diaspora in the country's economic, political, cultural and social life, from which the country and the Greek Diaspora could only benefit.

Read also via Greek News Agenda: [Lois Labrianidis on Greece's comparative advantages and the "Knowledge and Partnership Bridges" initiative](#); [Greece's New Emigration at Times of Crisis](#); [Eumigré: A research project on the new crisis-driven Greek emigration](#); [Reload Greece: Enterprising Diasporas – from Brain Drain to Brain Gain](#); [SEESOX Diaspora: New research project and website on Greek Diaspora](#)

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