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*Failed institution: The World Council of Hellenes Abroad  
(SAE) since 2008*

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# **Failed institution: The World Council of Hellenes Abroad (SAE) since 2008**

Marina Frangos

## **Abstract**

In December 1995, the first global General Assembly of the World Council for Hellenes Abroad (SAE) was held in Thessaloniki amidst great fanfare. At its peak in the late 1990s, there were SAE youth camps and academic conferences, humanitarian projects and political lobbying coupled with considerable active participation of the diaspora on a worldwide level. After the last General Assembly and elections were held in 2006, SAE's presence has dwindled: an occasional press release on current events, a meeting of one of the officers with a Greek minister and numerous promises that restructuring and new legislation would soon be realised. In 2013, the issue was even opened to public debate on [opengov.gr](http://opengov.gr), the much-touted Greek government platform that aspired to ensure transparency and maximise citizen engagement. At the same time, SAE's offices in Thessaloniki are now being used for other municipal services, while its three employees were harshly ousted. This paper attempts to explain SAE's brief history, by demonstrating its structural deficiencies and exploring its predicament and its prospects. Though the institution's demise coincided with the financial crisis that has plagued Greece since 2008, it was SAE's failure to become a relevant body for the diaspora that led it to near extinction.

**Keywords:** Global Hellenism; World Council for Hellenes Abroad (SAE); Greek government; Diaspora networks; State institutions;

## **Diaspora Connections**

Wednesday, May 16<sup>th</sup>, 2018 seemed to be just another ordinary day in the streets of Athens. There was the usual heavy traffic as one drove south on central Kifissias Avenue. A closer look revealed the many shops that had shut down, presently displaying faded rental ads; the grass and bushes hadn't been cut or trimmed; many potholes were left unrepaired and the narrow uneven sidewalks appeared unswept. Nothing reminded one of the Athens of yesteryear, the proud host-city of the Olympic Games in 2004, when everything was clean and shiny, well-groomed and posh.

Even so, passionate Greek politics was still present. At around 2pm on that Wednesday, Council of State<sup>1</sup> President Nikos Sakellariou resigned after a leak (on May 12<sup>th</sup>) of the High

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<sup>1</sup> In Greek 'Simvoulío tis Epikratias'.

Court's ruling that government pension cuts, imposed as part of several harsh austerity measures, were indeed constitutional: that leak had caused a tremendous backlash and heated protests staged by pensioners. No similar resignation had ever taken place in Greece, at least not after 1974, when the country entered a new era of democratic rule after a seven-year military dictatorship.

On that same day, May 16<sup>th</sup>, several news items aired which could have potentially drawn the attention of anyone interested even mildly in the Greek diaspora. At 11:00 am, a special session was held at the Hellenic Parliament to commemorate May 19<sup>th</sup>, a day of remembrance for the Pontic Greek Genocide. Mobilisation for international recognition of the atrocities committed against the Christian minorities of the Ottoman Empire during and immediately following World War I has drawn activists from the numerous Pontic Greek descendants residing in many countries, primarily the United States, Australia, Germany and Sweden.

In another government building, the Minister of Interior, Panos Skourletis, called a meeting with leaders of the opposition parties where changes to the limits of electoral districts were discussed; but, Kyriakos Mitsotakis, the leader of the majority opposition and other prominent members of the New Democracy party demanded that the issue of Greek Diaspora voting rights be added to the meeting's political gerrymandering agenda.

Meanwhile, in the evening, a book presentation by elderly Ioannis Varvitsiotis, a former right-wing Minister and Member of the Hellenic Parliament, was being held at the Athens Concert Hall (known as the 'Megaron'), an imposing building occupying the block adjacent to the US Embassy. Security was high as numerous past and present politicians, including the former Prime Minister of Greece Kostas Karamanlis, paraded amidst TV cameras, reporters and curious bystanders.

The Megaron is made up of several adjoining buildings and another event was scheduled to commence in the 'Alexandros Triantis' hall in the southern wing: an evening honouring Dr. Stamatios Krimigis, a prominent Greek American scientist with a distinguished career at NASA and Johns Hopkins University<sup>2</sup>. Not a single Greek politician attended this event, though the hall was packed with academics and well-known businessmen. There was an abundance of irony at this glamorous gala honouring the soft-spoken distinguished member of the Greek diaspora: on April 26<sup>th</sup> (less than three weeks earlier), Krimigis had unexpectedly resigned from Greece's newly formed space agency, the H.S.A. (Hellenic Space Agency).

His public, three-page, carefully-written letter of resignation was a blistering attack on Greek politics, where the government was accused of a lack of transparency and meritocracy in running the new agency. 'Follow the money' is the only phrase of the letter in English, directly implying the possibility of improper financial interests within the HSA. Krimigis cites two ministerial decisions this year that 'essentially annulled HSA's reason for existence', transforming

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<sup>2</sup> The evening was organised jointly by the Maria Tsakos Foundation and the Friends of the European Cultural Centre of Delphi.

it into an ‘untrustworthy bureaucratic structure that could be manipulated by any political supervisor’<sup>3</sup>. Krimigis also claimed that the General Secretary for Communications and Post Offices has assumed, with the tolerance of the Minister (of Digital Technology, Telecommunications and Media), the role of *space czar* in Greece, ‘even though he has no knowledge or experience in this area’.

Krimigis’ resignation letter could easily serve as a sad synopsis of another institution’s brief history: all one has to do is replace ‘Hellenic Space Agency’ with ‘World Council of Hellenes Abroad’, ‘Ministry of Digital Technology’ with ‘Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ and ‘General Secretariat for Communications and Post Offices’ with the ‘General Secretariat for Greeks Abroad’. That basically would sum up the unhappy tale of the World Council of Hellenes Abroad in three pages of a resignation letter.

### **A brief history of the World Council of Hellenes Abroad**

The World Council of Hellenes Abroad (known by its Greek acronym, SAE<sup>4</sup>) was founded in 1995 as an ‘organisation of organisations’ and sought to serve as, essentially, a parliament of global Hellenism. The institution’s existence spanned from its majestic inaugural General Assembly<sup>5</sup> in December of 1995 to around 2012-2013. The last General Assembly was held in December 2006, electing an 11-member Executive Board for a three-year term, which was later silently extended without elections through a Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Decree (Decision 4091/22.07.2010), also postponing the General Assembly and citing Greece’s dire financial situation at that time. For the period 2009-2012, there was very little activity on the part of SAE<sup>6</sup>: no conferences or events were held, just an occasional press release congratulating a victorious Greek athlete, offering condolences for a renowned Greek’s passing or just sending holiday greetings to far-reaching Greek communities from Executive Board members. SAE’s funding was inscribed on Greek government budgets as late as December 2012<sup>7</sup>, with funds for the sole purpose of compensating the three employees<sup>8</sup> at the Thessaloniki offices (the institution’s world

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<sup>3</sup> Translated excerpts of Krimigis’ letter were posted on <http://goodmorninggreece.com>, April 26<sup>th</sup>, 2018

<sup>4</sup> SAE= ‘Symvoulío Apodimou Ellinismou’ (literally *Council of Diaspora Hellenism*)

<sup>5</sup> *World Convention* and *Conference* have also been used for the events held every two or three years in Thessaloniki, where all SAE members gathered to participate in sessions on Diaspora issues and elect officers.

<sup>6</sup> The institution’s website can still be accessed online, [www.sae.gr](http://www.sae.gr). The English and Russian editions display Andrew Athens’ passing (March 14<sup>th</sup>, 2013) on the main page, whereas the Greek version displays SAE America (Region Coordinator) Ted Spyropoulos’ passing (October 1<sup>st</sup>, 2014). No postings of a later date appear anywhere on the website.

<sup>7</sup> See the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Decision 3727, December 14<sup>th</sup>, 2012 where SAE Funding ‘for the amount of 22,750 euros is approved and is to be deposited in President Stefanos Tamvakis’ account to cover expenses of the SAE Thessaloniki Office for the year 2012’. Accessed on [www.diafveia.gov.gr](http://www.diafveia.gov.gr) on April 5<sup>th</sup>, 2018 (Internet Uploading Number, ΑΔΑ: Β4Μ7469Η9Χ-ΠΗΨ).

<sup>8</sup> Two administrative employees and one cleaning lady.

headquarters). Despite this sorrowful finale, SAE's brief existence had been marked by some impressive efforts and accomplishments. Some of these are included in Table 1.

**Table 1: World Council of Hellenes Abroad (SAE) milestones**

1982	The General Secretariat for Greeks Abroad is established at the Ministry of Culture. In 1993, this government agency is placed under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.
1989	Article 17 of Law 1876/1989 calls for the founding of a worldwide organisation representing Diaspora Greeks.
1994	Prime Minister Andreas Papandreou appoints Grigoris Niotis as Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs (Greek Diaspora portfolio).
1995	Niotis travels the world and meets with representatives of Diaspora organisations who submit proposals for the creation of SAE.
Dec. 1995	The first founding General Assembly takes place in Thessaloniki, hailed 'capital of Diaspora Hellenism'. Greek American tycoon Andrew Athens is elected as SAE's first President; also elected are a Vice-President, 4 Regional Presidents (the Americas, Europe, Oceania, Asia/Africa) and three Secretaries. In subsequent elections, a Treasurer and a President for the Cypriot-Diaspora are added to the Executive Committee.
Jan. 1995	Due to PM Papandreou's illness, Kostas Simitis becomes Prime Minister of Greece; he not only ousts Niotis but abolishes the position of Greek Diaspora MFA Deputy Minister.
1996	Regional SAE conferences are held in Europe, Africa, the Americas and Australia.
1997	The first employees are hired for SAE headquarters in Thessaloniki (housed in a Macedonia-Thrace Bank building on a lease). The 2 <sup>nd</sup> General Assembly convention is held in December and Andrew Athens is re-elected.
1998	Boston is the first 'Hellenic Cultural Capital' (SAE N. & S. America); cultural events are held throughout the year. The first Diaspora Youth conference is held in Thessaloniki.
May 1998	\$20 million is pledged at a Global Mediathon involving Greek communities worldwide and ERT <sup>9</sup> for the Primary Health Care Clinics in the former USSR. The first clinic is opened a year later in Tbilisi, Georgia by Kostis Stephanopoulos, President of the Hellenic Republic.
Dec. 1998	Another legal entity (Foundation of (S)AE = 'Idrima Apodimou Ellinismou') is created to bypass bureaucracy and allow SAE to function as a charitable organisation ( <i>not</i> linked to the Greek government as SAE was).
June 1998	After years of political bargaining, the Makrides building (donated to the City of Thessaloniki to serve the Greek Diaspora), is established as SAE's headquarters.
July 1998	The first SAE Summer Youth Camp is held at Skotina, Pieria (Northern Greece).
Dec. 1999	3 <sup>rd</sup> SAE General Assembly: Andrew Athens is re-elected.
2001	Amendments to the Greek constitution name SAE as an 'advisory body' to the Greek government on Diaspora issues (Article 108) and provide for legislation to enable Greeks abroad to vote in national elections (Article 51).
Dec. 2001	4 <sup>th</sup> SAE General Assembly: Andrew Athens is re-elected. Plans to create a SAE Fund <sup>10</sup> to ensure the institution's financial autonomy are announced.
Dec. 2003	5 <sup>th</sup> SAE General Assembly: Andrew Athens is re-elected for three years (legislation now specifies 3-yr terms for all elected officers).

<sup>9</sup> ERT = Greek National Television (there are three public stations, all part of ERT: NET and ERT3 televised the Mediathon and many Greek community TV and Radio stations/programs broadcast it throughout the world).

<sup>10</sup> In Greek = 'Tameio Omogenon'.

June 2006	Further legislation on SAE's structure and function is passed.
Dec. 2006	6 <sup>th</sup> SAE General Assembly: Stefanos Tamvakis (a businessman from Alexandria, Egypt) is voted in as SAE World President.
2009	SAE Executive Board's terms are silently extended for another three years. No General Assembly is held in Thessaloniki and the Greek government attributes the postponement to the lack of funds and the Greek financial crisis.
2012	SAE's Executive Boards members cease referring to their association with SAE.
2013	Three employees at the SAE Headquarters in Thessaloniki are left unpaid for numerous months. They file suit against SAE and the Greek government <sup>11</sup> .
2013	SAE's future is opened to public debate through <a href="http://opengov.gr">opengov.gr</a> , the government platform. Almost all contributions are sent by people previously associated with SAE. And, the whole debate is conducted in Greek.
2018	Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Terence Quick begins a global tour of Greek communities promising a new SAE (but with a different name) within the next few years.

## Portrait of an institution: what went wrong

### *Before the fact: ominous prophecies*

When SAE's inaugural General Assembly was announced for December 1995, waves of enthusiasm spread throughout the numerous Greek communities in the four corners of the world. Though not many were certain of what the new institution would mean, it sounded promising and SAE initially won the support of most major Hellenic organisations. Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs (Diaspora portfolio) Grigoris Niotis, heading the undertaking, was relatively young and generally praised by his colleagues as being thoughtful and determined. He certainly seemed completely fascinated after having explored the many facets of the Greek diaspora during his travels and spoke with great affection of the many exceptional Hellenes he had encountered, from the wealthy and sophisticated Greeks in New York and London, to the nostalgic political refugees in Eastern Europe.

Niotis, however, had assumed the leadership of a sector he knew almost nothing about before his appointment, a situation quite common on the Greek political scene, especially where

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<sup>11</sup> See the Legal Opinion ('Gnomodotisi') issued by the Legal Council of the Hellenic State ('Nomiko Symvoulío tou Kratous') in May 2014 in response to an inquiry submitted by the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Kostas Tsiaras (in office from June 2012 to June 2013) pertaining to the compensation of three employees of the Foundation for Diaspora Hellenism ('Iðrìma Apodimou Ellinismou' = the legal entity created for SAE) whose salaries had been halved on July 26<sup>th</sup>, 2012 and who had not received any salaries during the periods April-July 2012 and January 2013-May 2014. It is mind-boggling that the Legal Council deemed the employees' plea as just (advising that they should receive full salaries and social security payments) but, could not hold neither the defunct SAE Executive Board, nor the Greek State accountable or responsible to take any action. In closing, the Legal Opinion states that a temporary administration for both SAE and the Foundation be created. No timeframe is mentioned. On [www.diavgeia.gov.gr](http://www.diavgeia.gov.gr), Internet Uploading Number, ΑΔΑ: 7ΑΧΖΟΡΡΕ-ΚΤΦ, last access April 5, 2018. No subsequent Legal Opinions or rulings on this matter have appeared on 'diavgeia'.

the diaspora is concerned. He soon embarked on a globe-trotting mission to reach out and consult with Greek diaspora leaders worldwide, hoping to come up with the best plan for SAE's creation while visiting Greek communities from Canada to Australia and from Georgia to Argentina. Just one year after Niotis' appointment, in February 1995, a Foreign Affairs Ministry press release claimed that the project of creating a global Greek council was in its final stage of development. However, it seems many of those who could have provided substantial guidance for SAE's creation had not been contacted, as the list in Table 2 demonstrates.

In March of that same year, *Odyssey*<sup>12</sup> magazine's cover story was entitled 'Is there a Global Greek Village? The Puzzle of Global Hellenism', with publisher and founder Gregory Maniatis by-lining the 6-page article on the proposed Council of Diaspora Hellenism<sup>13</sup> that included 'discussions with over 30 prominent figures in the Greek Diaspora', 'ten hours of discussion held by *Odyssey* with Niotis and his advisors' and access to SAE's working documents 'made available to *Odyssey* by ministry sources'<sup>14</sup>.

Almost all those interviewed by *Odyssey*<sup>15</sup> centred their concerns about SAE's creation on two major themes: the need to differentiate among the substantially varied Greek communities abroad and the compelling need to avoid any direct link between the Greek state and the diaspora organisations, made up mostly of citizens of other countries. George Savidis, speaking on behalf of the American Hellenic Educational Progressive Association (AHEPA), was wary of any potential direct links between the Greek government and the Greek-American lobby. 'My main concern', he stated, 'is that diaspora Greeks will engage in reverse lobbying with the Greek government, saying, for instance, they ought to take a harder line with Macedonia'. Savidis also stated that AHEPA had never been contacted by the Foreign Ministry, despite being the largest organisation of Greek Americans after the (Greek Orthodox) (C)hurch (Maniatis, 1995, pp. 28-29).

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<sup>12</sup> *Odyssey-The World of Greece* magazine's first issue appeared in 1993 (August/September), but the magazine is no longer published. Its website address ([www.odyssey.gr](http://www.odyssey.gr)) now hosts information about Greece with no reference or relevance to the magazine.

<sup>13</sup> This was the translation used in the magazine article. The English name used for SAE after it was created was World Council of Hellenes Abroad.

<sup>14</sup> Maniatis, G., 1995, 'The Puzzle of Global Hellenism', *Odyssey*, March/April 1995, pp. 27-31, 74.

<sup>15</sup> Interviewees included Van Coufoudakis, Director of the Greek Studies Program at Indiana University; Peter Pappas, Director of the North American branch of the Foundation for Hellenic Culture; Nicholas Gage, author and President of the Pan-Epirotiki Federation of USA & Canada and George Savidis, AHEPA Public Relations Officer.



**Table 2: List of prominent Greek Americans not contacted before SAE's creation<sup>16</sup>**

George Savidis	Director of Public Relations AHEPA	NEVER CONTACTED
Olympia Snowe	US Senator (R-Maine)	NEVER CONTACTED
Angelo Tsakopoulos	Real Estate Developer/AKT Development	NEVER CONTACTED
Peter Angelos	Trial Lawyer/Majority Owner Baltimore Orioles	NEVER CONTACTED
John Catsimatidis	Owner/Chairman Red Apple Group & United Refining Company	NEVER CONTACTED
John Brademas†	Former US Congressman/NYU President	NEVER CONTACTED
Charles Moskos†	Northwestern University Sociology Professor	NEVER CONTACTED
Michael Dertouzos †	MIT Professor and Computer Science Lab Director	NEVER CONTACTED

*Prognosis realised: SAE's infancy and main deficiencies<sup>17</sup>*

Despite the many diaspora and domestic voices that had expressed their reservations and concerns, SAE's inaugural General Assembly was rather hastily organised and took place over ten days in early December 1995. Roughly half of Greece's cabinet ministers, as well as the presidents of Greece and Cyprus, spoke to 255 delegates and over 700 other diaspora guests in Thessaloniki amidst much fanfare and rhetoric. The greatest boost SAE received in its early years was the fact that its first elected President was Andrew Athens, a Greek American multimillionaire. Athens was one of Archbishop Iakovos'<sup>18</sup> closest allies and a major contributor to the Church; he was also one of the biggest financial backers of Greek American lobbying in Washington. Athens was viewed by almost everyone, including the Greek government, as the one who could best ensure the Council's influence in its infancy.

He soon embarked on an ambitious project, initially known as the SAE Primary Health Care Initiative (later renamed Hellenicare). It is considered by many as SAE's greatest achievement and its plans aspired to the creation of 22 medical centres to provide free medical services to the residents of six former Soviet Union republics in areas where forgotten, yet proud and persevering, Hellenic communities struggled to survive. By 2008, there were six medical centres in operation (three in Tbilisi, Tsalka and Tsikhisjvari in Georgia; one in Alaverdi, Armenia; one in Mariupol, Ukraine; and, one in Georgoutsates, Albania with the support of Archbishop Anastasios). In 2011, a Hellenicare press release announced plans to expand the medical program in Armenia, citing the support of a special grant from the US Department of State (Office of Humanitarian Assistance). At that time, Andrew Athens still headed Hellenicare (an independent

<sup>16</sup> Compiled from the article by Maniatis, G., 1995, 'The Puzzle of Global Hellenism', *Odyssey*, March/April 1995, pp. 28-31.

<sup>17</sup> Data on SAE delegates in this presentation was collected during the 1995, 1997 and 2006 SAE General Assemblies in Thessaloniki by the author.

<sup>18</sup> At that time, Iakovos was the Archbishop of North and South America. That Archdiocese has since been separated into different entities for the United States, Canada, Mexico and Argentina.

legal entity) but, was no longer the World President of SAE. SAE was not mentioned in this press release (Greek News website, 2011). There is no information on these medical centres presently, though they may still be in operation, but not associated with SAE or Hellenicare<sup>19</sup>, which also appears to be defunct.

Beyond Hellenicare, SAE's standing within the diaspora communities began to erode early on, as its structural deficiencies quickly became a handicap and the subject of much criticism.

### *Delegate selection*

One of the most basic problems that plagued SAE from its founding was the issue of representation. Exactly how were delegates chosen to participate in SAE's proceedings? How could an organisation become a SAE member? As the Greek government had organised the founding convention in 1995, it seemed logical that the relevant government agency, the General Secretariat for Greeks Abroad, would manage the invitations on that occasion. But, even during the last convention SAE held in 2006, the issue remained problematic, despite SAE resolutions issued as early as 1997 unrelentingly proclaiming that (the representation issue) 'should not continue'. Subsequent ministerial decrees regarding SAE's structure allowed for the SAE Executive Board to be consulted during the invitation process, but other provisions in the same legislation granted the Greek government the freedom to invite 'noteworthy' individuals and other organisations, blatantly influencing the electoral process. To make matters worse, the Greek government could also invite delegates to participate in various associated fora (such as those for youth, business, academia and culture, women, and diaspora politicians); other representative boards were elected during these fora and these delegates automatically became voting members of the General Assembly. In addition, as shown in Table 3, almost one-third of the delegates in 2006 had attended all six General Assembly meetings in Thessaloniki (only 23% attending for the first time, close to 50% having attended more than four times), completely substantiating the claim that the diaspora was hardly being properly represented.

**Table 3: SAE delegate renewal**

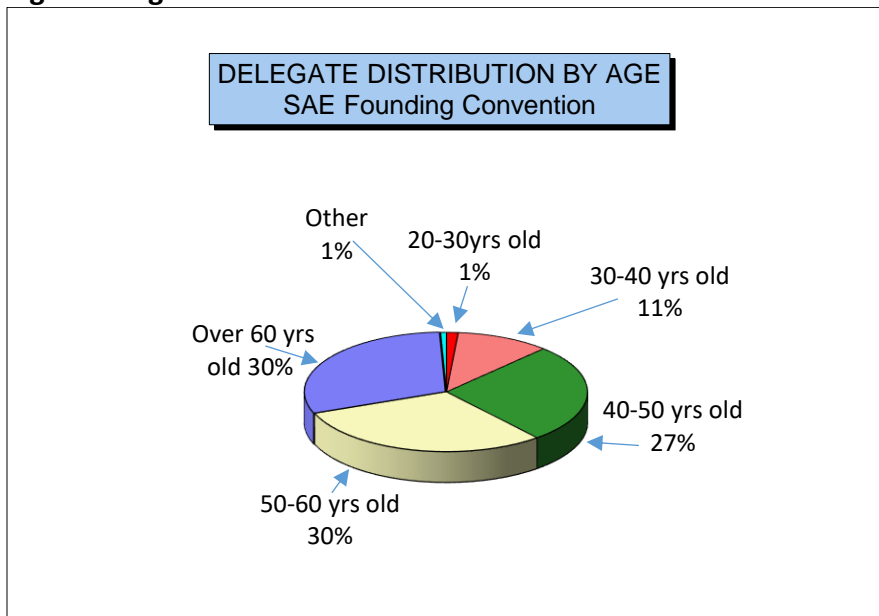
<b>Participations</b>	<b>Once</b>	<b>Twice</b>	<b>Three times</b>	<b>Four times</b>	<b>Five times</b>	<b>Six times</b>
<b>SAE Delegates (2006)</b>	23%	15%	15%	11%	7%	29%

<sup>19</sup> Hellenicare appears on Bloomberg's company profile listings as a non-profit organisation. However, the phone number listed has been disconnected and no information has appeared anywhere since 2011. See: <https://www.bloomberg.com/profiles/companies/0421905D:US-hellenicare-inc>.

### *Absence of subsequent diaspora generations and younger Diaspora*

In 1995, I personally created a brief questionnaire for delegates at the SAE founding General Assembly and collected valuable data (even translating numerous questionnaires into Russian and finding willing interpreters to assist those from the former Soviet Union being interviewed). I repeated this process at the subsequent General Assemblies of 1999 and 2006. Few general trends changed over that period, apart from the bloating number of delegates invited (255 in 1995, over 800 in 2006)<sup>20</sup>.

**Figure 1: Age distribution**

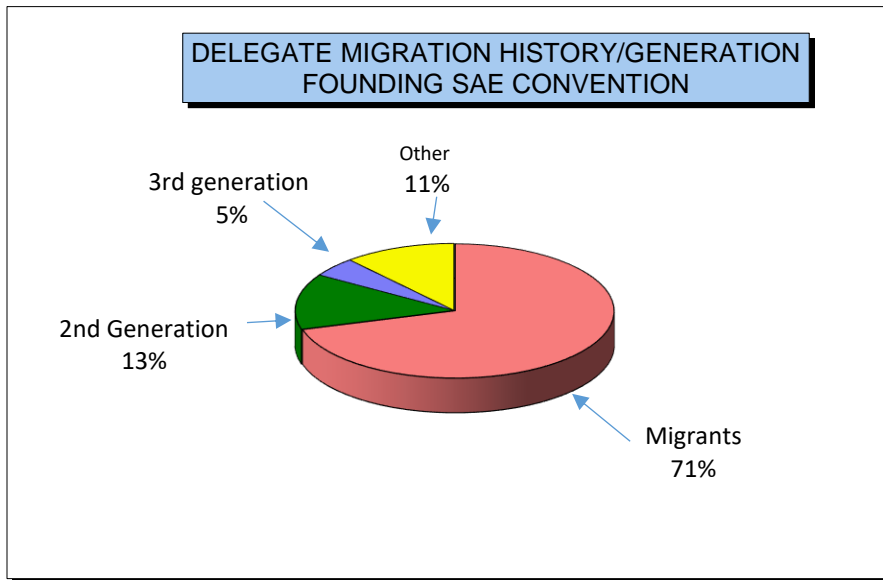


At the first SAE General Assembly, it became evident that most delegates from the various organisations were first-generation Greek-speaking immigrants, who had fled Greece in the migration waves of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s: the overwhelming majority (87%) of SAE representatives were over 40 years old (60% over 50 years old), as demonstrated in Figure 1. In addition, 71% had been born in Greece, a percentage that was greatly inconsistent with the cross-generational total diaspora membership (See Figure 2). Americans of Greek descent were already in the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> generations of migration in 1995, and yet 80% of SAE delegates from the USA were Greek-born at that time. Despite repeated promises that this would change by the second convention, the percentage of SAE delegates born in Greece had dropped only slightly to 65% by SAE's third General Assembly in 1999. It seemed that representatives of the Greek political

<sup>20</sup> In 1995, I had been hired by HELEXPO as a member of the team organising SAE's founding General Assembly; during subsequent General Assemblies, I continued this research as a researcher and Ph.D. candidate at the University of the Aegean.

establishment simply felt more comfortable dealing with diaspora members who spoke the 'same language', both literally and figuratively.

**Figure 2: SAE delegates by generation**



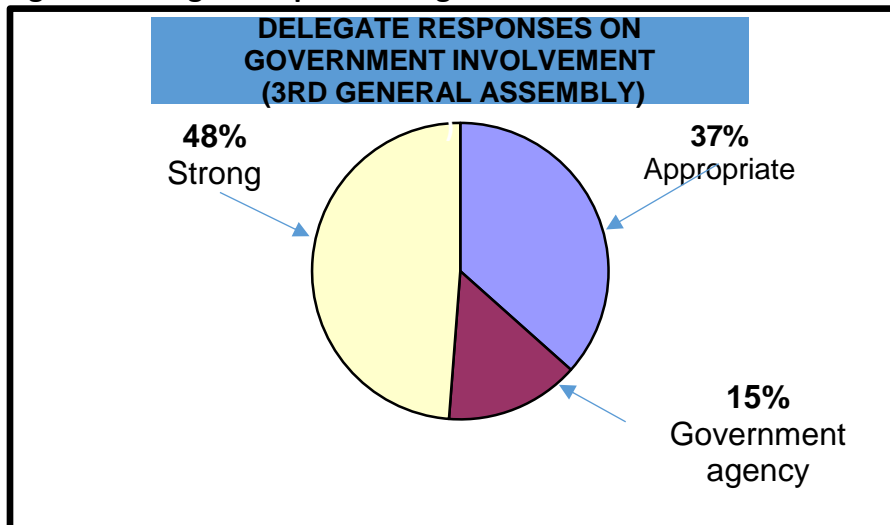
### *Government intervention*

The harshest criticism on SAE for the entirety of its existence was that it was essentially an organisation dominated by the Greek government, a justified claim if one considers that the Greek state financed the whole endeavour, provided offices for its Thessaloniki headquarters and funded the salaries of several employees over the course of approximately 15 years. Though Andrew Athens was quite successful in leveraging donations for SAE's Primary Health Care Initiative from both diaspora organisations and wealthy individuals, very little was done to change the legislation which granted the Greek government authority to organise General Assemblies and provide administrative and financial support of SAE's daily business.

Perhaps not so surprisingly, even SAE delegates believed that Greek government involvement was strong, whereas a significant percentage (15%) thought SAE was a genuine government agency. Not a single delegate thought that government involvement was 'little' or 'none'—despite all the many references to SAE as a non-governmental organisation, as shown in Figure 3. Indeed, it was SAE's close ties to the Greek government that led AHEPA - the largest Greek grassroots organisation worldwide - to withdraw its membership for a period. The Greek government appeared fearful of a wider diaspora representation and continuously postponed

taking action that would significantly change SAE's electoral body and therefore, possibly lead to the election of an Executive Board that was unpredictable and potentially uncontrollable.<sup>21</sup>

**Figure 3: Delegate responses on government involvement in SAE**



At the last General Assembly held in Thessaloniki in 2006, Andrew Athens did not run for World President after having served for five terms (totalling 11 years) and Stefanos Tamvakis, a well-respected businessman from the historic (but practically non-existent) Greek community of Alexandria, Egypt was elected for a three-year term. When Greece was faced with the global financial crisis of 2008, the situation for SAE became increasingly predictable and precarious. In 2009, a ministerial decree postponed the planned General Assembly for a year and extended the term of the elected Executive Board for the same period. A similar decree was issued in November of 2010. By late 2012, all SAE operations had virtually ceased.

### Reflection and prospects

The title of this paper is 'Failed institution? The World Council of Hellenes Abroad since 2008' and this may mislead some observers to swiftly conclude that SAE's demise came because of the 2008 global financial crisis that led Greece into a decade of harsh austerity measures, capital controls,

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<sup>21</sup> Out of the six SAE General Assemblies held in Thessaloniki (1995, 1997, 1999, 2001, 2003 and 2006), the first five were held with PASOK (Panhellenic Socialist Movement) in power in Greece; in 2004, the conservative ND (New Democracy) party won the elections but missed the opportunity to significantly change legislation pertaining to SAE. In 2006, the sixth, and last, SAE General Assembly was held in Thessaloniki with ND still in power, but funding for SAE's operations and General Assemblies, as well as the invitation process and setting the agenda, remained in the hands of the Greek government.

bailout loans from the IMF, the Eurogroup and the European Central Bank, as well as the impoverishment and loss of income and property for a great number of the Greek people.

This simply is not the case, at least regarding the World Council of Hellenes Abroad, whose predicament was quite evident from the very beginning. Part of the problem lay in setting expectations too high, as it was obviously unreasonable to ever expect 11 people (SAE's elected Executive Board) to effectively tackle all the issues facing millions of diaspora Greeks in tens of countries, though this was effectively what SAE's mission statement had claimed<sup>22</sup>. However, SAE suffered primarily because of its structural and organisational deficiencies, as was demonstrated briefly in this paper. It was doomed from the start to be unrepresentative of the Hellenic diaspora and thus, incapable of forging a coherent mission for itself<sup>23</sup>. As such, it primarily became a public relations vehicle for Greek politicians seeking to leverage the diaspora's allure for a domestic audience and a junket for 'professional Greeks' the world over who flew free to the homeland every two or three years, a common complaint throughout diaspora organisations and media. All this hauntingly alludes to the recent story involving NASA scientist Stamatis Krimigis and the aspiring new government creation of the Hellenic Space Agency.

But, then again, there is the greater picture to consider. Portions of the research I conducted having attended all six SAE General Assemblies had been used when I was writing SAE-related articles for *Odyssey* magazine. The magazine's story is another chapter of recent Greek diaspora tales worth taking a closer at. Charles Moskos, the sociologist probably most associated with Greek-American studies in the United States, had written that *Odyssey* 'is now the leading magazine for Greek-Americans. Not shying away from controversial topics, *Odyssey* also has attractive colour photographs and drawings of highly professional quality' (Moskos, 1999: 115). For many, *Odyssey* was the only English-language magazine to ever link Greeks and philhellenes around the world.

Both SAE and *Odyssey* were created in the affluent mid-1990s and are now non-existent, with signs of their eventual disappearance clearly present after 2008. This may very well be a coincidence, as SAE was essentially a Greek government project and *Odyssey* was a private enterprise. On the other hand, this outcome could be attributed to the challenging difficulties any endeavour involving the diaspora is forced to deal with and to the reality of a decline of diaspora engagement with the homeland for 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup> and subsequent-generation-Greeks who are probably completely integrated and assimilated in their countries of residence. The fact that a new Greek diaspora is in the making, with thousands of young educated Greeks abandoning their

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<sup>22</sup> As set forth in the 1995 Presidential Decree founding SAE, SAE is the advisory body to the Hellenic Republic on all matters of interest to Hellenes abroad (i.e. Hellenes who reside in, or are citizens of, a country other than Greece). Such matters include, among others, strengthening cultural and economic ties between Greece and the countries in which Hellenes reside, strengthening the Hellenic identity and the role of Hellenism and Orthodoxy, supporting Greek organizations worldwide and assisting Hellenes who return permanently to Greece.

<sup>23</sup> The resolutions (decisions) voted on at the founding General Assembly in 1995, clearly echoed the mission statement in the 1995 Presidential Decree through which SAE was established.

homeland after 2010 in search of better employment prospects, only makes the need to plan and organise any new entities responsibly and thoughtfully more critical.

On March 11<sup>th</sup>, 2018, Terence Quick, the then Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs (diaspora portfolio) was interviewed on ERT-3's 'Hellas Pandou' weekly program. He stressed the need to re-create SAE, as is required by the Greek constitution<sup>24</sup>, but emphasised that he would first and foremost propose that its name be changed during a subsequent revision of the Greek constitution, as 'SAE is a word our Diaspora hears and freaks out'<sup>25</sup>. Quick was also adamant about the necessity for the new institution to be fully financially self-sufficient and independent of the Greek government. Despite its shortcomings, SAE's existence and achievements did contribute to greatly raising awareness about the diaspora's history and potential, both in Greece and abroad; an opportunity to benefit from this awareness and proceed to the next level after processing the lessons from the past may be present.

As a popular Greek saying goes 'may your words leave your mouth and (fly) directly into God's ears'; reflecting on the experience with SAE and many other ambitious global projects undertaken in the past, it's safer to say little, prepare for the worst and work diligently for the best.

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<sup>24</sup> In 2001, amendments to the Greek constitution included the addition of a second paragraph to Article 108, which now reads: 'Legislation designates the structure, function and responsibilities of the World Council of Hellenes Abroad (SAE), whose mission is to express all forces of global Hellenism'.

<sup>25</sup> Transcript of an interview (in Greek) with Terence Quick on *Ελλάς Παντού* (=Greece worldwide (?)), broadcast on ERT-3 on March 11<sup>th</sup>, 2018.

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# The Greek Diaspora Project at SEESOX

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## Mission statement

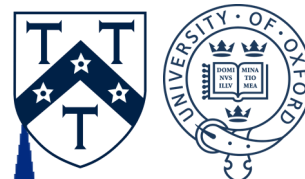
The Greek Diaspora Project (GDP) was set up at SEESOX with the overall aim to serve as a nexus between academic research and policy, and to help identify ideas to maximise the developmental impact of the Greek diaspora on contemporary Greek politics, economy and society. The project studies the relationship between Greece and its diaspora within the context of the current economic crisis and beyond.

## Project objectives

- Become the preeminent forum for debate between the wider diaspora scholarship and scholarship dedicated to the Greek diaspora;
- Relate Greece and its diaspora to other similar countries and conduct in-depth comparative studies;
- Be a port of call for anyone interested in contemporary aspects of the Greek diaspora, in terms of its library and archival resources, activities, institutional affiliations, policy relevant research;
- Analyse the new trends characterizing the current Greek diaspora in conjunction to the historical context, socio-economic change, varieties of cultural affinities;
- Assess the developmental impact of the diaspora on the Greek economy and identify policies that can maximize its contribution;
- Inform Greek public debate and Greek policy makers on the Greek diaspora, its evolution and the policy implications of actual and potential interactions between the diaspora and Greece;
- Secure funding and research opportunities for a young generation of scholars dedicated to the study of the Greek diaspora.

## About SEESOX

South East European Studies at Oxford (SEESOX) is part of the European Studies Centre (ESC) at St Antony's College, Oxford. It focuses on the interdisciplinary study of the Balkans, Greece, Turkey and Cyprus. Drawing on the academic excellence of the University and an international network of associates, it conducts academic and policy relevant research on the current multifaceted transformations of the region. It follows closely regional phenomena and analyses the historical and intellectual influences which have shaped perceptions and actions in the region. In Oxford's best tradition, the SEESOX team is committed to understanding the present through the *longue durée* and reflecting on the future through high quality scholarship.



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