

British Museum in 'TA NEA': "Discussions with Greece are constructive, and continue."

Statement by the representative of the British Museum, in the wake of the diplomatic incident caused by the cancellation by Rishi Sunak of the meeting with Kyriakos Mitsotakis

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Negotiations with Greece aimed at finding a "mutually acceptable solution" for the Parthenon Sculptures have not been interrupted, a spokesman for the British Museum's told TA NEA yesterday, in the wake of the diplomatic incident caused by British Prime Minister **Rishi Sunak**'s decision to cancel his meeting with **Kyriakos Mitsotakis** in London at five o'clock on Monday.

"The position of the Museum remains unchanged. Discussions with Greece on a 'partnership with the Parthenon' are ongoing and constructive," the spokesman said, referring to negotiations that have been ongoing since November 2021 between the Greek government and British Museum's Trustee Chair, **George Osborne**.

According to sources at the Museum, this week's diplomatic incident will not affect the development of the current talks. In fact, these sources expressed last night the "hope" that a deal between London and Athens will be reached "in the near future", suggesting that Osborne will continue to seek a solution with Mitsotakis.

"We believe that a long-term collaboration of this kind will strike the right balance so that on the one hand we share our most important objects with audiences around the world, and on the other hand we preserve the integrity of the unique collection we have in the Museum," the British Museum spokesman added, indirectly referring to a "solution", which would result in the lending of the Sculptures to Greece.

The leader of the British main opposition, Sir **Keir Starmer**, who met with Mitsotakis yesterday afternoon, has now been added to the equation. The leader of the Labour Party, and prime minister-in-waiting, has reportedly assured that if he becomes prime minister, he is willing "to look for paths" that will lead to the reunification of masterpieces of classical antiquity, without changing the British law, which currently prevents the sculptures from being returned to Greece.

The Greek Prime Minister, and the government delegation accompanying him landed in back in Athens yesterday, four hours earlier than planned, since the appointment with Sunak did not take place and the meeting with British Deputy Prime Minister Oliver Dowden proposed by London was rejected. 'TA NEA' saw a visibly irritated Mitsotakis on Monday night, minutes after confirming the cancellation of the meeting.

Yesterday afternoon, Sunak's spokesman accused the Greek Prime Minister of "reneging" on a "promise" he had made that he would not turn his visit into a "public platform" to demand the return of the Marbles. Athens categorically denies that such a promise was made. A letter sent by the UK's Foreign Office to Mitsotakis' diplomatic office said the "timing and style" of Mitsotakis' interview with the BBC was "particularly outrageous".

Conservative circles argued that Sunak was annoyed that the Greek prime minister met with the leader of the main opposition, even though the appointment had long been known in Downing

Street. They also called Starmer "frivolous" for allegedly supporting a deal for the Marbles. A Labour Party spokesman described Sunak's stance as "deplorable". "The fact that he's fighting with a NATO ally for the sake of a headline shows how weak he is."

Gerapetritis meets Cameron

Regarding the future of Greek-British relations in the aftermath of the diplomatic incident, Greece stressed that "our relationship with Britain is not affected." Yesterday, on the sidelines of the NATO Foreign Ministers' Meeting, George Gerapetritis met with his British counterpart (and former Prime Minister) David Cameron, at the latter's request. The Greek Foreign Minister did point out to his UK counterpart that the "disagreement of principle" continues to exist on the issue of the return of the Marbles. However, the two ministers agreed that there is a need for cooperation to safeguard bilateral relations.

Wave of reactions in Britain

The British media also covered extensively the Greek-British "conflict" yesterday. The BBC spoke of a "diplomatic dispute that has broken out between the British and Greek governments". In an editorial, the Financial Times wrote that Sunak's actions "diminish Britain in the eyes of its European partners and the world. British diplomacy should win friends, not lose them." The Guardian referred to "Greek-British tensions not seen for many decades". "You can tell it smells like an election," observed BBC editor-in-chief Chris Mason. "At the heart of this diplomatic row is a very internal political dispute between the Conservatives and Labour," he added.

"Britain is isolated on the issue of the Parthenon Sculptures. Greece's request for reunification will remain on the table, as it has been for more than four decades since it was submitted to UNESCO. We will continue our campaign and urge Greece to continue asking the Museum's trustees and Britain to do what is right: return the sculptures, but not as loans, to their natural environment, the Acropolis Museum," Paul Cartledge, professor emeritus of Greek culture at Cambridge University and vice-chair of the British Committee for the Reunification of the Marbles (BCRPM), told TA NEA.

"It is very sad that Mr Sunak has cancelled his meeting with Mr Mitsotakis. The Parthenon Sculptures were just one of the topics for discussion, among other very important issues. The dialogue between Athens and the British Museum, the pressure on the British establishment and politicians must continue. I am confident that in the end a satisfactory solution will be found, acceptable to all parties," Dr. Chris Tytgat, President of the International Association for the Reunification of Sculptures (IARPS), told TA NEA.

"It is a pity that the British Prime Minister feels that he cannot discuss the issue of the Marbles with the Greek Prime Minister, especially considering how much both countries have to gain from a rational resolution to the issue. The solution is for the two sides to agree to disagree on ownership, and to enter into a mutually beneficial agreement, with the sculptures reunited in Athens," Parthenon Project spokesman Josh Lampkin said.