

Interview With U.S Ambassador Kounalakis To Hungary For M1 TV's "Az Este" Program

Tuesday, 20 November 2012

M1: 2012 was a long and costly (inaudible) campaign and left somehow the country divided. The balance of power has remained unchanged; the re-elected president has to deal with the Republican congress. The first and biggest challenge of the new Obama administration is to strike a deal with the Republican congress to avoid the fiscal cliff. Do you think it is possible to get a compromise soon?

Ambassador Kounalakis: I think it's very clear that even though the election is over there is an enormous amount of work that's yet to be done. Many people are talking about the fiscal cliff and the concerns over reaching agreement between the Republicans in the House, the Democrats in the Senate and then of course the President, but I think that there is a clear message that was delivered by the people of the United States and that was that we want to see problem solving, we want to see solutions. I also think that both in the President's victory speech and Governor Romney's concession speech that message was clear; both candidates heard that message loud and clear and also across all the other races that took place that the people want problems solved. And so, it's my hope, as it is the hope of I think most Americans, that we'll see cooperation and working together in order to be able to avoid any really dramatic outcomes.

M1: Maybe they can postpone the fiscal cliff, but what is needed, many experts say is bipartisan programs where Republicans and Democrats can get together and solve problems like the fiscal cliff, like reducing debt, or creating jobs. Some experts say that in the next 10 years, 25 million jobs are needed in the U.S. and it's up to the president, the two parties to get a bipartisan agreement. Do you think it is possible, the newly elected Senate and Congress that some people will get together and find not just a short-term solution but a longer term solution for problems the U.S. economy has?

Ambassador Kounalakis: It was a hard fought campaign and people were very vocal and very motivated to get their opinions out and to debate the big important issues in the United States. That's what elections are about and quite frankly, we are pretty proud of our system. As vocal as it can get and sometimes really as heated as the debate can get, it's about using that debate and using that discussion to get closer to what the right answers are. You really have to debate things out in order to be able to think about the pros and cons of different decisions, of different ways to move forward to deal for instance with our economic challenges ahead. But I am very hopeful, and I think we are just going to watch and wait and see, but I'm very hopeful that our politicians in Washington will be able to sit down and to work together to solve problems.

M1: During the election campaign, Hilary Clinton hinted on leaving her post and then in an interview with the Wall Street Journal, she left open the possibility…

Ambassador Kounalakis: I'll give you the short answer for that. Secretaries often stay one term. She always said that was her intention. What she said recently was that she wants a smooth transition and so she is going to ensure that she will be there through a smooth transition, but nothing changed in terms of the fact that she already announced her plans to resign, or retire.

M1: Are there any candidates at the moment?

Ambassador Kounalakis: You know I can't really speculate, because whoever that is, is going to be my boss.

M1: But Colin Powell endorsed Obama during the campaign.

Ambassador Kounalakis: I don't know.

M1: All right. Usually, when there is a change in the State Department, there is a change in diplomatic positions. And when your term is nearing an end, what are your plans?

Ambassador Kounalakis: Well I'm a special case; I'm a political appointee so I serve at the pleasure of the president. Frankly, I haven't thought about it yet. It was important to see what happened in the election in a case like mine, so, I have no plans really to go anywhere at the moment and as far as I know there are no plans to replace me. We just have to see what happens. And, of course, if it's up to my children we'll stay in Hungary forever.

M1: Wow, that's good to hear. Well, during this three year term, you had your differences with the government, with the opposition parties as well. You were here in the campaign, the 2010 campaign, and you had some differences with the kind of legislative [pieces of legislation] that the government is accepting. What are the issues right now?

Ambassador Kounalakis: Let me be clear: The United States does not take sides in Hungarian politics. Hungary is a friend and a NATO ally of the United States. Our relationship is strong, it is built on values, and we have partnerships and cooperation in many, many ways. I really want to emphasize that.

But it's true: this has been a time of tremendous change in Hungary. A new constitution, 350 new laws, passed through Parliament with a super-majority and when Hillary Clinton came in the summer of 2011, she commented on this process and really encouraged the government to keep an eye on the importance of strong, independent democratic institutions, like the free media, like the free judiciary, independent judiciary. A lot has happened since then and what I will say is that from January, when the Constitution was adopted, over these last ten months, there has been a lot of engagement on the part of members of the Hungarian government within the EU. Of course, Hungary is a member of the EU.

There are these institutions that are set up to give feedback on member states' laws, and so we have been very much encouraging this process, but in large part it has been members of the government that have willingly been working with the Venice Commission and with the Council of Europe. And we think that Hungary deserves a lot of credit for going into this process; it is our opinion that some good results have come out of it. And there have been modifications to some of the more controversial laws as a result. And now, what I can say is that it appears as though this is an ongoing process, and that there are continuing discussions about some of these more controversial laws. It's a very unusual circumstance to see the laws, the constitution of a country, so many of them change so quickly. In such a way that almost every single important institution of this country has changed. But again, as I've said, we have raised some concerns but we are very encouraged by the process that the government has been going through to ensure that the democratic institutions stay independent and that checks and balances remain in place here in Hungary.

M1: Madam Ambassador, thanks for the interview.

Ambassador Kounalakis: Thank you.

Source: U.S. Embassy Budapest

(XPatLoop.com)