

Greek PM set to quit Socialist party leadership

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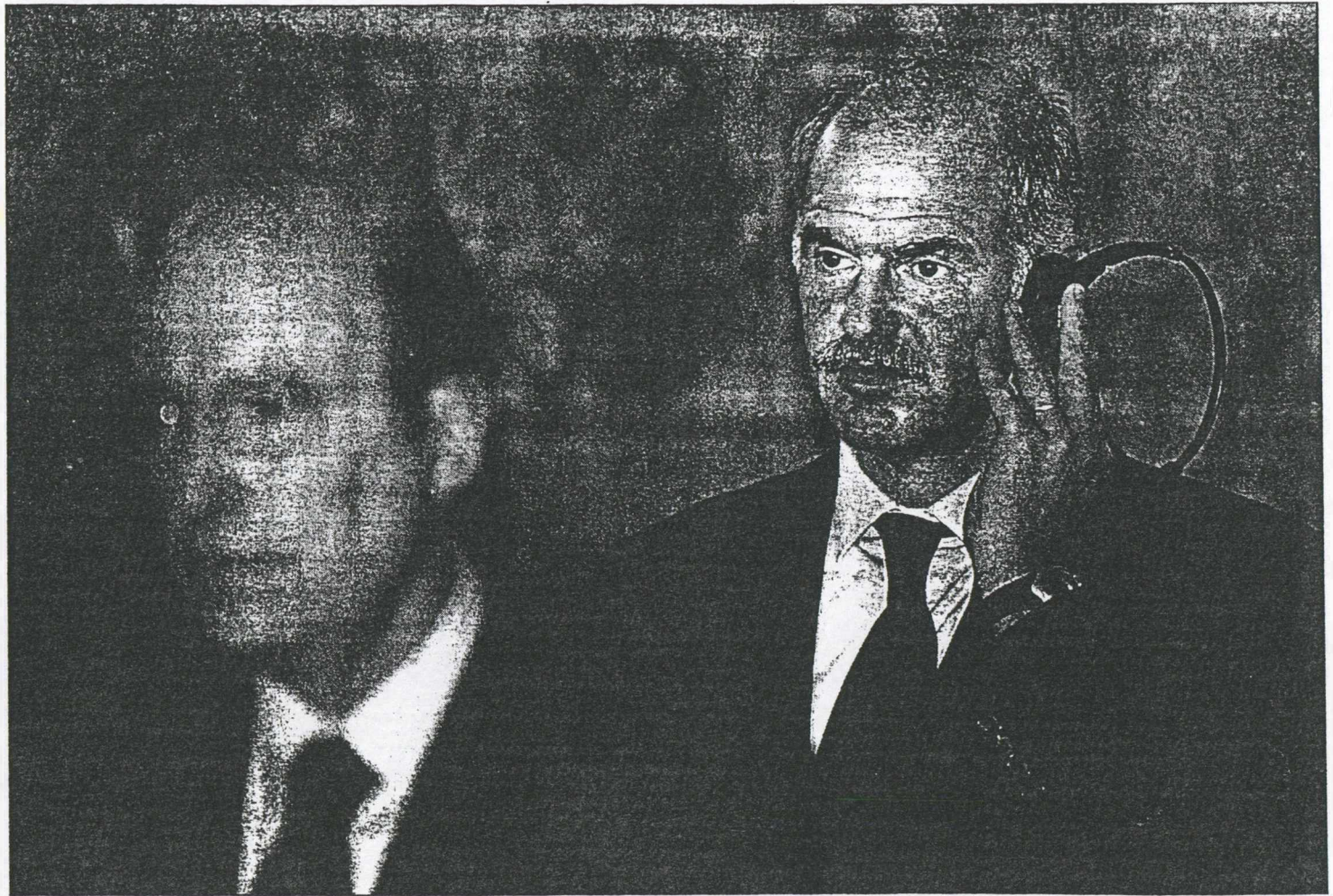
By Kerin Hope in Athens

Costas Simitis, the Greek prime minister, is this week expected to announce his resignation as leader of the governing Socialist party and endorse George Papandreou, the foreign minister, to succeed him.

Mr Simitis's move is aimed at boosting the Socialists' flagging popularity in opinion polls ahead of parliamentary elections likely to take place on March 14. The Socialists, in power for all but three of the past 22 years, have been trailing the centre-right New Democracy party by around eight points.

Mr Simitis, 67, and his team of "modernisers" brought Greece into the eurozone and oversaw a significant improvement in relations with Turkey after a long period of hostility over Cyprus and control of the Aegean Sea. But after eight years in office, he has faced pressure to make way for a younger leader.

An opinion poll published yesterday gave Mr Papandreou, 51, an approval rating of 72 per cent among voters, compared with 51 per cent for Mr Simitis and 54 per cent for Costas Karamanlis, the ND leader.



Costas Simitis (left) and George Papandreou, whom he is expected to endorse to succeed him as leader of the Socialist party

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A senior party official said a smooth handover could also bring the Socialists extra votes: "This would be almost the first time in Greek politics that a party transfers leadership in an orderly way, rather than forcing someone out after an election defeat."

By announcing his resignation ahead of the election, Mr Simitis would also signal the possibility of becoming a candidate for a senior European Union post, although advisers have played down speculation he wants to succeed Romano Prodi, European Commission president.

However, it was unclear yesterday whether Mr Simitis would also stand down as prime minister and allow Mr Papandreou to head the government in the run-up to the election.

The two have been allies since Mr Papandreou backed Mr Simitis for the leadership

at a party congress in 1996. Mr Papandreou, the son of the party founder - the late prime minister Andreas Papandreou - enjoys the support of both the Socialists' modernising faction and the hardline nationalists who formed his father's power base.

Mr Papandreou would formally launch his candidacy at a special party congress this month. He would propose a change in the party's constitution so that the new leader would be elected by the party's 250,000-odd grassroots members rather than by Congress delegates.