

**Message**  
**by Prime Minister Costas Simitis**  
**on the occasion of the**  
**68<sup>th</sup> Thessaloniki International Trade Fair**

The 68<sup>th</sup> Thessaloniki International Trade Fair is organised this year at a historic moment for Greece's prospects.

The successful Hellenic Presidency of the EU, which culminated with the Thessaloniki Summit, advanced the international standing of Greece. It was recognised by everyone that Greece presented an image of a country that plays a leading role in European developments.

The Hellenic Presidency left its imprint on Europe by promoting the cohesion of the EU of 25; furthermore, the results of the Convention on the Future of Europe signal the future course of Europe.

The Thessaloniki International Trade Fair aspires to express the international economic environment and advance, more than ever, the cooperation between the productive forces of various countries. Such forces are not afraid of sound competition, but seek to improve through it.

The purpose of this year's Thessaloniki International Trade Fair, which is held nine months before the end of the term of this administration, is also to highlight an undisputed fact: Greece's strong economic growth, which was confirmed by our country's accession to the Economic and Monetary Union.

The growth rate of Greek economy continues to be higher than the EU average, accelerating Greece's convergence towards the developed Western European countries.

This is reflected in the thousands of minor and major projects in progress, which are changing the image of Greece and expanding its potential.

A huge endeavour to achieve real economic and social convergence towards our developed EU partners is well under way.

Real convergence concerns wages, incomes, productivity and competitiveness. Above all, it concerns social convergence in terms of welfare benefits, health, education and public administration. Growth is aimed at everyone's welfare, combined with social cohesion and respect for the environment.

Our economic policy consistently pursues a threefold objective: Growth-Employment-Competitiveness. This policy focuses on :

- ◆ fostering entrepreneurship
- ◆ promptly and comprehensively streamlining all markets
- ◆ broadening the scope of employment, training and retraining programmes
- ◆ reorienting the agricultural economy towards a participatory qualitative farming model, with respect for the environment and social needs, as well as for the farmers' status and prospects
- ◆ increasing real incomes and reducing the cost of living.

In our major endeavour to achieve balanced regional development in Greece, Thessaloniki and Northern Greece play a leading role. This role is strengthened by :

- The planning of an integrated set of projects, actions and interventions at the national, regional, prefectural and local levels in the greater area.
- The EU's expansion to the Central and Eastern Europe, which materialised during the Hellenic Presidency.
- Greece's dynamic and active presence in the neighbouring Balkan states, in conjunction with its constructive contribution to the de-escalation of crises and the easing of tensions that are a threat to peace and stability in this sensitive area.
- Greece's valuable assistance to and encouragement of Western Balkan countries to continue the democratisation and reform process that will allow them to join the EU in due time.
- The selection of Thessaloniki as the domicile of supranational entities, such as the Stability Pact and the Balkan Reconstruction Organisation. Thessaloniki has already become a decision-making centre for the greater area. The operation of the World Bank's liaison office by the Inter-Balkan & Black Sea Business Centre (DIPEK) and the implementation of the SECI initiative confirm the changes that are gradually taking place in Thessaloniki.

In terms of purely economic and business activity, Thessaloniki is becoming the economic capital of the Balkan mainland.

We have established a policy for the Balkans which enabled us to tighten our relations with the Balkan countries and to increase the Greek presence in the neighbouring countries. Thus, many firms were given trade or investment opportunities. Thousands of Greek firms have invested in the Balkans, either independently or by forming joint ventures or establishing subsidiaries; moreover, Greek companies have engaged in considerable acquisition activity in the banking, oil and telecommunications sectors. This is an unprecedented

phenomenon. We are implementing a major investment programme for the reconstruction of the Balkans, which strengthens the presence and cooperation of Greek firms in this area.

We are on the threshold of a new era for Greece. I believe that we can be optimistic today. As a society and a country, we have proved our enormous potential. Our country has regained its self-confidence and over a few years has managed to weather international economic and regional crises, firmly keeping on its way. Economic growth in Greece has proved remarkably resilient against a background of global economic slowdown, as noted in the IMF's recent bulletin. A few months ago, running the Presidency of the EU, Greece addressed the crisis concerning Iraq with sober and balanced actions. Greece is a country that achieved so much in such a short time, managing what earlier seemed to be unbelievable. At such historic moments, our vision and our future path should be clear.

Indeed, we strive for growth combined with social sensitivity, which is the spearhead of our policy.

Thus, we will move forward for a Greece with a strong society, cohesion and solidarity, stronger growth and diffusion of welfare to all citizens.