

F.T 8/3/2000 p. 2.

# Greece urges Milosevic to hold free elections

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in Belgrade and  
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George Papandreou, the Greek foreign minister, on a rare visit by a western official to Belgrade, yesterday met Yugoslav president Slobodan Milosevic to urge him to hold free and fair elections and start restoring normal ties with Europe.

The European Union is keen to send a message to Mr Milosevic to run a clean campaign and refrain from stealing votes in September 24 presidential elections. Opinion polls show Vojislav Kostunica, the opposition candidate, has a clear lead, but few people expect Mr Milosevic to hand over power quietly and suggest he will instead resort to electoral fraud to remain in office.

At a press conference Mr Papandreou said that Europe expected "first of all a free and fair electoral process. The world will be watching

and there had to be a willingness to allow change...the ability to live with the change in the region without revenge".

Mr Papandreou is the only senior official of a Nato government to have visited Belgrade since last year's Kosovo conflict. European heads of state have instead preferred to keep their contact with Mr Milosevic, who has been indicted as war criminal, to a minimum.

News of Mr Papandreou's visit was greeted with a tangible and total lack of enthusiasm in Brussels although the institutions of the European Union and Atlantic alliance declined to comment officially.

It has long been accepted by the international community that Greece and Serbia have a long-standing special relationship as members of the orthodox religious world. However sources stressed that Mr Papandreou was not carrying out an EU-mandated mission.

Alliance sources said the visit had to be seen against the background of the very strong public support in Greece for Serbia during the Kosovo war. Greece stuck with its Nato allies during that difficult period and yesterday's visit was a price the alliance had to pay, said a spokesperson.

However, Mr Papandreou suggested there was a divergence of views behind the hardline stance that the EU had taken against Serbia.

He said there was a feeling among some EU member states that the international community needed to rethink policy on Yugoslavia. "There is a desire that we move one step forward...and get beyond this impasse," said Mr Papandreou. A growing number of countries, including Greece, Italy and France, have suggested lifting sanctions but opinion in the EU remains that such a move ahead of elections would be a free gift to Mr Milosevic.