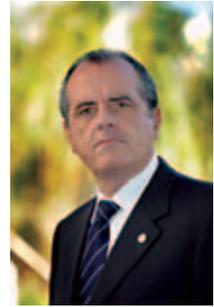


President's Page

Creation of a Congress Centre in Greece

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Greece continues to go through a very difficult time, as the dire local consequences of the international financial crisis show no signs of relenting. In the current climate of uncertainty, it is hard to find reasons for optimism.

The Prime Minister maintains, as do the majority of our politicians, that Greece has the potential to escape from the crisis; however, it will require the implementation of correct policies by the government, and the mobilisation of all the productive forces of society. In practice, that may be achieved by encouraging the flourishing of initiatives that will result in an increase in employment and the production of wealth.

Tourism and shipping are the areas that offer the best relative advantages, given that Greece lacks heavy industry. In many people's view, tourism has the most potential for further development, mainly through an improvement in quality.

One of the most important forms of quality tourism is related to congresses, an area in which Greece lags significantly behind. The reason is the lack of congress centres capable of hosting large-scale events.

Let us be more specific. As every year, this year, too, a large number of Greek cardiologists attended the European Congress of Cardiology. This congress is ranked among the biggest and most important medical congresses in the world. It is organised by the European Society of Cardiology at the end of August, each year in a different European city. Cities that have the necessary facilities – an adequate hotel and transportation infrastructure, as well as, most importantly, a large and well organised congress centre – take turns hosting it. At the moment, those cities are Nice, Barcelona, Vienna, Stockholm, Amsterdam, Berlin, Munich and Paris. For many of them, Barce-

lona for example, hosting a large number of congresses is a basic pillar of the local economy.

This year, the congress was held in Stockholm. The number of participants exceeded 30,000 cardiologists who, with about the same number of accompanying persons, occupied every corner of the Swedish capital (and beyond) for five days. The resultant financial turnover was estimated to exceed three hundred million euros.

All of us who take part in current European cardiological events feel sad that this congress cannot take place in Greece. The reason? The 2004 Olympics left Athens with all the necessary infrastructures – modern airport, underground train network, suburban railway, new urban highways, high-level hotel facilities with a large number of beds, etc. – except for a congress centre that could host large-scale events.

It is noteworthy that the responsible committee of the European Society of Cardiology has suggested repeatedly in the past to the Hellenic Cardiological Society that the European Congress should be organised in Athens, which is generally considered to be one of the most popular destinations in the world. We can be sure that the same suggestion will come up again in the near future, since for the period 2012-2013 the President of the ESC will be a Greek (P. Vardas, Professor of Cardiology, University of Crete).

This has become a hot topic recently, because of the discussions going on about the utilisation of the old Hellenikon airport. Various so-called 'experts', or representatives of special interest groups, are talking to the mass media about the creation of a "metropolitan park" or a "Las Vegas" in miniature; however, no one has mentioned an investment that, apart from its obvious benefit to the economy and the em-

ployment situation – more than 1,000 jobs – could achieve a real leap in quality tourism, given that the participants in congresses tend to be leading lights in science, technology and economic life, as well as individuals with an income level considerably better than the average. The creation of a congress centre at Hellenikon would appear to be extremely easy and relatively low-cost. It would not cause any environmental damage, since in essence the existing constructions from the old airport could be utilised and easily converted into congress halls.

This tactic has been successfully employed in similar cases in other countries, such as, for example, the conversion of the old Munich airport into a modern congress centre that is international in scope. Many countries have realised the importance of large congress centres for development. One such centre began operation years ago in Istanbul, overlooking the Golden Horn, and another is under construction in Oporto, Portugal.

One might expect that in modern Greece the responsible political officials would address such issues with the proper seriousness, rather than getting bogged down and questioning the obvious. Unfortunately, the reality is quite different. In June 2010, the Member of Parliament for the Dodecanese, Professor D. Kremastinos, submitted a formal question to the

Minister of Economic Development, Competitiveness and Shipping, and the Minister of Culture and Tourism, concerning the creation of a large congress centre in Rhodes and its incorporation in the National Strategic Reference Framework. The former Minister noted that “the responsibility for planning policies and actions related to tourism belongs to the Ministry of Culture and Tourism. The answer from the latter Ministry, signed by Mr. Pavlos Geroulanos, was as follows: “... during recent years it was decided to create a congress centre by suitable conversion of the Olympic Tae Kwon Do building in Faliro ... The department intends to proceed with a unified call for tenders that will include both its construction and maintenance, and its operation ... However, it is neither intended nor feasible that the size of the congress centre being created (in the Tae Kwon Do building or elsewhere) could reach the dimensions proposed by the Member who posed the question. Taking into account the idiosyncrasies of our country ... installations of such scope ... could not possibly be reconciled with the scale of land ownership, landscape, architecture, or even our country’s economy.”

Populism apart, one can easily understand the mentality of those who occupy posts of responsibility, which has led this blessed country to be one of the most debt ridden in the world.