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The new Macedonian question

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*James Pettifer explores the emerging Macedonian question, comparing the new Skopje regime with the aspirations of traditional Macedonian nationalism, and argues that extreme economic instability will be the central feature of the new **Macedonian** state. He sets out the current positions of the main regional protagonists and the role of the EC as a replacement for the great powers of the past.*

All Balkan territorial disputes have their mythologies; that of the Macedonian question is that of the most bloody, complex and intractable of all, in a small peninsula already well burdened. But it was also the conflict that, perhaps more than any other, socialist Yugoslavia seemed to have superseded. So what gave rise to some of the most acute political turmoil of the interwar period, particularly the recurrent Macedonian assassinations and bombings, seemed to have been 'solved' by Tito's creation. It is in its way appropriate, then, that it is only with the final demise of Yugoslavia, symbolized by international recognition of the independent Croatian state, that the new Macedonian problem is emerging.

The purpose of this paper is not to try to put forward any blueprint for 'solution' of the issue; that would be wholly inappropriate, as the outlines of the new Macedonian state are only becoming apparent, and it is very far from clear what shape many aspects of its political and military orientation will take. All that is possible is to try to indicate what the basis of the old Question was, and to suggest some comparisons with the past and present; and in that light to try to see what the problems for the international community may be. There is every indication that the process of remaking the Balkans is spreading southwards; and the centre of gravity of events may soon focus on Macedonia, as it has done in the past, and it will be disturbing if international attention is distracted from this process simply because armed conflict between Serbia and Croatia has been brought to an end, at least at the time of writing.

Macedonia: the Eastern Question, and the shortage of Macedonians

In one sense, Macedonia throughout the nineteenth century was no different from its four immediate neighbours, Serbia, Greece, Albania and Bulgaria, in that all these peoples were struggling to throw off rule from Constantinople and the declining power of the Sublime Porte. In the different phases of the Eastern Question the standing of the different candidate nation-states waxed and waned, generally linked to the power of their larger non-Balkan backers and different diplomatic imperatives, arising in many cases from events far outside the Balkans themselves. Throughout the peninsula border issues were paramount, for as the distribution of population under the old Ottoman system of government was determined on the *millet* system, where religion rather than race or language was taken as the basis of administrative organization, existing Ottoman governmental divisions often bore little relation to the aspirations of the majority of the inhabitants living within them.

But unlike Serbia or Greece, in Macedonia there was no basically homogeneous population made up of one potentially dominant group that could form the basis of a new nation-state. There was, however, and still is, a plainly dominant majority in the cultural sense, in that there are more people of Slavonic origin living there than of any other group—but only within a patchwork of extreme complexity, with Turks, Greeks, Albanians, Vlachs, Pomaks and Gypsies living alongside the Slavonic majority; and, moreover, that majority is itself subdivided into Serbian, Bulgarian and 'Macedonian' elements.

Under the Ottoman regime no detailed statistics were kept of the Macedonian population, and substantial changes in numbers were caused by the Balkan wars of 1912 and 1913. But according to Foreign Office papers from 1918 there were in Macedonia, before 1912, about 1,150,000 Slavs, 400,000 Turks, 120,000 Albanians, 300,000 Greeks, 200,000 Vlachs, 100,000 Jews and 10,000 Gypsies. Although these figures would probably be disputed, then and now, by partisans of the different nationalities, there seems to be no reason why they should not be taken as at least a rough approximation of the position at that time.

Although there have been substantial changes since, they have not produced a more homogeneous population, merely changed the mixture. Given the problems with recent Yugoslav censuses, in which boycotts for political reasons have been common, figures now are no more exact than they were in 1912, but the main developments have been the near total disappearance of the Jewish community as a result of Nazi persecution, a greatly reduced Vlach presence due to the heavy losses this community of pastoralists suffered in the second Balkan war, a substantial increase in numbers of Gypsies, a very great increase numbers of Albanians, a reduction in those of Greeks, a stable Turkish presence, a small immigration of northern ex-Yugoslav groups such as Croats and Montenegrins, and the open split of the Slavonic group into Serbian and

Macedonian identities. There were also, until very recently, some people who preferred to regard themselves as Yugoslavs.

According to the 1981 Yugoslav census, probably the last where figures have any substance before the whole process was vitiated by political manipulation, the population of the Socialist Republic of Macedonia was 1,912,257 of whom 1,281,195 were Macedonians, 377,726 Albanians, 44,613 Serbs, 39,555 Pomaks, 47,223 Gypsies, 86,691 Turks, 7,190 Vlachs and 1,984 Bulgarians, plus a small number of people from six other ethnic groups. The main change since then has been the inexorable rise in Albanian numbers, which may now amount to as much as a quarter of the whole population, with a disproportionate age bias towards youth so that over the next 20 years or so the Albanian element is certain to increase further. The overall shortage of Macedonians is compounded by the fact that some ethnic groups, particularly the Vlachs, have tended to call themselves Macedonians if they have become urbanized, while retaining a de facto Vlach identity in cultural and domestic life, particularly if, until recently, they were country-dwellers.

What is most important about these figures is that they indicate a consistent and unresolved problem for any Macedonian state based on Skopje, whether before the First World War or now, in that a predominantly urban political elite of Macedonians is ruling over a country where they have almost no presence at all in very large rural areas (for example, the Albanian regions of western Macedonia), and that in nearly all these cases, like that of the Pirin river Bulgarophile Slav population, the non-Macedonian minority is, or has been, wooed by the neighbouring nation-state. This is the origin of the famous Macedonian fear of the 'Four Wolves' which surround the country: Greece, Albania, Bulgaria and Serbia. Although now all four neighbouring states have said that they have no claim on Macedonian territory, there are substantial political parties in all of them, with the partial exception of Greece, who do have claims over Macedonian territory or who want a revision of the position of their compatriot minorities that would have a profoundly destabilizing effect on the new Macedonia.

The original Macedonian question: the heritage of IMRO

The seminal date for the original issue was 1878, after the Treaty of Berlin had overthrown the short-lived 'Greater Bulgaria' established by the Treaty of San Stefano. Under the earlier treaty much of what is now Macedonia had been given to Bulgaria, but the great powers, fearful of the possibility that a Greater Bulgaria could dominate the whole peninsula, had subsequently changed their minds. The first phase of the question is dominated by the efforts of a revisionist Bulgaria to recover what was lost in 1878. At the same time Serbia was actively expansionist in the south, calling Macedonia 'South Serbia' and establishing Serbian schools and churches there. Greek policy followed a similar pattern dominated by the breach in Orthodox ranks many years before, caused by the establishment of the Bulgarian Exarchate in 1870. About 1,400 Greek schools

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existed by 1895 while Vlachs, speaking a language related to Romanian, had persuaded the Bucharest government to pay for over 30 Vlach language schools.

Underlying the vigorous cultural struggle for the allegiance of the population was a much deeper and longer history, on the Greek side at least. Although it is difficult for non-Greeks to understand, as the generally negative international reaction to Greek objections to EC recognition of Macedonian independence has shown, the existence of Macedonia as a part of Greece has a fundamental place in the Greek political psyche. Alexander the Great was a Macedonian and the period of his empire has a much greater hold on the Greek popular imagination than outsiders can easily appreciate. There is, of course, some dispute about the Greekness of the world of Alexander, and numerous volumes have been produced by partisans of the different nationalities to prove or disprove particular arguments. The best known statement of the Greek position is made by Dascalakis in his book *The Hellenism of the Ancient Macedonians*,¹ in which he sets out very fully the literary and archeological evidence as he sees it. Slav scholars usually concentrate their arguments on the passage in Plutarch where the ancient historian describes the struggles that took place between Alexander's successors, referring to the troops as 'shouting in Macedonian'. The Slav lobbyists usually conclude that this shows the existence of an autochthonous Macedonian people who were colonized by a Greek-speaking ruling class. And so on. Like many other academic disputes, the shortage of evidence means that both sides can continue their polemics more or less indefinitely. But in terms of practical political rhetoric, the disputes are very important and very much alive, particularly those aspects of them which threaten to disturb normal Greek assumptions about the nature of Greek identity throughout recorded history being based on the use of the Greek language. Another point which should be borne in mind when considering what may at first sight seem to be the exaggerated Greek response to the new state is the traditional Greek fear of instability and invasion coming from the north. Generally speaking, nearly all invasions of Greece from the time of the Slavs in the Dark Ages to the German and Italian motorized divisions of the Second World War have followed the same routes down through the northern mountain passes towards Athens, with similar results. For Greeks, the Macedonian problem awakens ancestral fears that had been conveniently forgotten for many years after the improvement of relations with Tito's Yugoslavia and the end of the Greek civil war. They are not, of course, fears of invasion at the moment, merely of chronic instability and involvement in Balkan feuds; but the fears are nonetheless real. The border of northern Greece with Albania, Macedonia and Bulgaria is very long, and the Greek army and police will be very stretched to defend it in the event of a breakdown of good relations with the states to the north.

So in terms of the neighbours of the new Macedonia, the heritage of the

¹ C. Dascalakis, *The Hellenism of the Ancient Macedonians* (Thessalonika: Institute of Balkan Studies, 1981).

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Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (IMRO) is represented by the creation of a new political vacuum as much as anything else. The type of Greater Macedonia that was envisaged by the nineteenth-century nationalists a much larger state than the present one, with an opening to an Aegean port. The problem now is best summed up in one sentence, uttered to me by an inhabitant of Skopje not long after the independence referendum last autumn: 'What are we going to build a new state with? Tobacco plants?'

Whatever political complexion the new state may have, the underlying realities are likely to be dominated by the extreme economic weakness of the country, and it is apparent that many Serbs in Belgrade still feel that this critical weakness may mean that Macedonia eventually, or perhaps quickly, will have to come back towards some sort of new Yugoslav federation, led by Serbia, as the only means of Macedonian economic survival. There are few competitive modern industries, and it is unfortunate that agriculture is dominated by the production of a single crop, tobacco (and high-tar tobacco at that), which is already in oversupply within the EC. The actual condition of the soil is frequently poor, with over-cultivation and soil erosion common problems, and although extensive investment could generate substantial improvements in production, the means to accomplish them are not in sight.

Foreign exchange reserves to back the new denar are almost non-existent, and there seems to be a strong possibility that in the absence of a stable and internationally recognized Macedonian currency to replace the almost worthless ex-Yugoslav dinar, the currencies of the adjoining states will circulate in neighbouring Macedonian regions and become the de facto currency of those parts of Macedonia. There is some evidence of this happening already in the Pirin river area adjoining Bulgaria. No great leap of the imagination is required to see the likely political consequences that flow from this, where the regions concerned start to look towards Sofia or Thessalonika, rather than Skopje, for economic and political leadership. But whatever form this process takes, it is likely that one of the central respects in which the new Macedonian question will differ from the old will have to do with the primacy of economic survival. The Macedonia that IMRO envisaged in the nineteenth century would have consisted almost entirely of semi-subsistence peasants and pastoralists: and Macedonian tobacco was worth, proportionately, a good deal more than it is now. That entity would not have had the pretensions of a modern industrialized state within Western Europe, which is perhaps the Achilles heel of the new nation. This is despite the fact that throughout the Yugoslav era, Macedonia was at the bottom of the federal heap in every way, in terms of wage or output levels, literacy, social and educational provision, or any other measure. The non-party government of experts at present in power in Skopje has in effect placed its salvation at Brussel's door. If no investment and economic help from the EC of the scale needed to transform the situation is forthcoming, then the policies of Macedonia's neighbours will be crucial in determining the future. The government sees this process as having two main stages, the first concerned with getting widespread international recognition of statehood, by

the EC in particular, which the second, international investment, will follow. But in the absence of recognition, the power of Macedonia's neighbours will be decisive.

Albania, Greece, Serbia and Bulgaria: wolves or lambs?

It is not possible to set out in full detail the positions of all the different significant currents of opinion in all four of these countries towards the new Macedonian state; all that is attempted below is a general survey of the main factors that are likely to affect the situation in the immediate future.

Albania

In Albania, the formation of the new state has been welcomed, primarily because it is seen as a counterweight to Serbia and an irritant to Greece. Cultural relations were reasonably close for some time under Tito and the latter years of Yugoslavia, and although recently the Albanian government has taken up the human rights issues raised by the Albanian minority in Macedonia, as their position compares very favourably with the very bad conditions endured by the Albanians in Serbian-ruled Kosovo, the issue has not been pursued very energetically. But Albanian nationalism is growing, particularly in the northern parts of western Macedonia adjoining Kosovo where Albanians dominate, in population terms. A referendum held in January this year produced an overwhelming majority for Albanian autonomy. The de facto border imposed between Kosovo and Skopje by the Yugoslav federal army has been strongly-resented. There are also growing trade links with Albania proper, for despite the appalling problems of the Albanian economy, there is a reasonable amount of hard currency in circulation there, which can be used to pay for many Macedonian goods that with the collapse of inter-Yugoslav trade arrangements had become almost unsaleable. Quite sizeable quantities of wine, for instance, are being imported into Albania. But it should be noted that this trade, as elsewhere, depends on the availability of hard, or at least, respected currency, in the neighbouring state. It is also axiomatic that little if any of the revenue generated will find its way back to the government in Skopje, in any shape or form.

It appears that for the time being, at least, in terms of the regional dimension of the Macedonian issue, the Albanian government will try to achieve supportive and good relations with the new state. If hostilities develop between Albania and Serbia over Kosovo, which is a very real possibility and accounts for much of the current concern in Tirana over army re-equipment, Macedonia will become strategically important to both parties, and at the moment Tirana is unlikely to back the claims of the Tetovo-based Albanian parties in Macedonia too far. That said, relations in Macedonia between the Albanian minority and Skopje are poor, and worsening. The boycott of the original independence referendum by the Albanians in September 1991 was felt to be

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very much a stab in the back, and there have been calls in some quarters for the two Albanian parties to be banned. Although there are one or two Albanians at high levels in the new government, in general they are excluded from most important decision making processes in Skopje. A particularly critical issue will be the composition of the new 35,000-strong Macedonian army which the government is in the process of creating. It appears that few, if any, Albanians will be allowed in senior positions. Since the parties representing ethnic Albanians are dissatisfied with the number of ethnic Albanian officers in the new army, they have called on the youth to boycott conscription. But by and large Macedonia, is not a central issue in Albanian politics at the moment, and this is likely to remain the case for the immediate future.

Greece

In Greece, the demise of Yugoslavia was accepted later, and with more reluctance than in almost any other state in the world. Important Greek trade **routes** pass through Yugoslavia, and Yugoslav stability was important for many **economic** reasons. But the economic problems, critically serious for only a short **phase** of the Yugoslav crisis which resulted in the loss of most of a year's peach exports, pale into insignificance beside the emergence of the new proto-Macedonian state—a development which all Greek politicians would have regarded as unthinkable as recently as nine months previously. The problems regarding the ancient cultural heritage have been referred to above. A more potent heritage, in terms of recent history, is the legacy of bitterness from the civil war, in which many of the Slav-speaking minority of northern Greece became active communists and in particular were deeply involved in the guerrilla army, ELAS. It has been estimated that there were as many as 70,000 Slav-speakers in the ELAS forces in the last phase of the civil war that ended in 1949. Many went into exile in Skopje, and have risen to influential positions. THERE IS AN element of revenge, here, in the view of some in Athens. Across the Mainstream political spectrum it has been suggested that the left-wing side in the civil war was some sort of minority Slav conspiracy, rather than a mass movement that had widespread support throughout Greece only two or three years before. In addition to reopening a difficult international and regional issue, the new Macedonian question also risks reopening some of the wounds and unresolved internal controversies in Greece arising from the civil war and how it was won by the Right with foreign support. There are also difficult questions for the Greeks concerning human rights issues in relation to the treatment of the remaining Slav speakers left in Greece after the civil war. In the far north, the writ of Athens has seldom ever run easily, and turmoil and border problems of the kind now appearing may stretch the fabric of Greek democracy itself. There have already been accusations of quite serious human rights abuses against Greek security forces on the Albanian border. But equally, there is a growth of banditry in these regions, with armed gangs of Albanians and Macedonians making raids into Greece, and a deterioration in the economy of already poor

northern cities such as Fiorina. A strong mood of militant Greek nationalism is developing across the political spectrum, tinged with popular concern, at the apparent failure of the Athens politicians to deal with the Macedonian problem firmly enough in its early stages.

The official responses of the Greek government to the emergence of Macedonia are well known and have been well publicized in the last few months. The Greek approach has been to use whatever leverage it can within the EC to prevent recognition of a state called 'Macedonia' and to attempt to base diplomatic initiatives on the assumption that some sort of new Yugoslav federation may well emerge that will include Macedonia as a component part. In essence, this differs little from the previous policy of backing Serbia to the hilt, and there is a general correspondence between Athens and the main currents of Serbian thinking in Belgrade. The private visit made to Athens by the Serbian president in March this year to discuss the synchronization of policy is very significant. But it must be very doubtful how much longer this policy can remain viable. The first major victim has been the Greek foreign minister, Mr Samaras, who was sacked in April this year by prime minister Mitsotakis for taking a hard line over Macedonian recognition, in line with the wishes of EC leaders eager for a settlement. But Mitsotakis miscalculated the degree of feeling against recognition among the Greek public and was forced into a vote of confidence in parliament which was only survived with some difficulty. With a majority of only two in parliament, and a substantial body of opinion in the New Democratic Party (ND) supporting the positions of Mr Samaras (particularly members from northern Greek constituencies), the Macedonian issue is clearly capable of bringing down the government. It should also be noted that the Greek President, Mr Karamanlis, is of Macedonian origin.

At some point in the short term, the Greeks will be forced into an open choice between the EC and Serbia, but it should not be assumed that the Greek public will easily back the European line: preparations for the Single Market, with the austerity programme monitored by EC officials in Athens leading to some quite dramatic rises in the cost of living, and a resurgence of support for the PASOK opposition, which would probably be returned to power if an election were held now, has increased the unpopularity of the EC in Greece.

But however the issue is dealt with in the short term in Athens, it is presumably clear in Brussels that without major external assistance the new Macedonia is likely to collapse economically, and there is no prospect whatsoever of international investment in a state that does not have diplomatic recognition, as the shadowy existence of the 'Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus' has shown. The prospects for democracy would also be as poor. In the light of the developing crisis in Bosnia, there is no reason to suppose that the re-integration of Macedonia into a new Yugoslav federation is practicable. The federal army has been systematically withdrawing from Macedonia, and border posts, even with Albania, are now controlled by Macedonian officials. In so far as the federal army is the decisive force on the ground, it shows every sign at the moment of being willing to abandon Macedonia to its fate.

unfortunately some early actions of the Skopje government have been insensitive to Greek concerns, especially the draft banknote design showing a prominent historic building in Thessalonika as 'Macedonian', at least by implication.

Although there are well founded rumours of splits in the Greek foreign policy establishment over Macedonia, it is hard to see what new policy could be formed without abandoning vital Greek positions, as Mr Mitsotakis discovered in April. The disputes with the EC. have fundamentally affected public opinion, and he has little room to manoeuvre. In the immediate future the most important developments affecting Macedonia are likely to be in Greece, as the government there attempts to find some compromise between European pressures and domestic viewpoints. As in other problem areas of the Balkans recently, the EC has on this issue often seemed deeply insensitive to the legitimate concerns of people about their cultural identity, to the detriment of the EC- political influence.

Serbia

In Serbia, the government does not at the moment appear strong enough to risk a confrontation with Skopje, in particular given the care with which the Macedonians have attempted to proceed in such a way as to avoid war. Although there is a single substantial Serbian enclave in Macedonia, at Kumanovo, the inhabitants do not at the moment appear to feel threatened and have not resorted to the proclamations of armed 'independent' Serbian "republics" that have so bedevilled peace efforts in the north, although pro-autonomy referenda have been held in some places. Serbs have traditionally controlled some of the most prominent economic enterprises in Skopje, and in some cases seem to be turning themselves into honorary Macedonians, in order to benefit from the privatization process. How long this uneasy equilibrium will last is doubtful.

The main dimension of Serbian policy is to allow Macedonia to become a dependent statelet; but if any of the surrounding powers, especially Bulgaria, increased their influence in Skopje dramatically, or took matters as far as territorial revision, then Belgrade would consider itself forced to act. At the moment Serbian interests are served by a policy of inactivity, with the hope in the background that Macedonia will fail to become a viable state and will turn to Serbia as its least offensive neighbour for protection. But Serbian leader Slobodan Milosevic has in the recent past allied himself with the advocates of a Greater Serbia including Macedonia, who claim that it is really 'South Serbia', exactly as it was described in the 1890s. The leader of the Serbian far Right, Vojislav Seselj, has spoken in favour of a partition of Macedonia between Bulgaria and Serbia, with a few small areas given to Albania. The Serbian Orthodox Church considers its Macedonian co-religionists as renegades, and that the bishopric of Skopje should be Serbian. The Macedonian Church was

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to all intents and purposes set up by Tito. And so on. Although at the moment Serbia is unable to pursue a forward policy towards Macedonia, that state of affairs could rapidly change.

Bulgaria

Bulgaria has traditionally been the power with the most direct designs on Macedonian territory. In the late nineteenth century quite sizeable sections of the Macedonian population fled to Sofia, and to this day many Bulgarian cities are made up of people of almost wholly Macedonian origin. Many scholars consider the Macedonian language to be basically a dialect of Bulgarian. In the 1956 census 187,000 people declared themselves to be Macedonians, despite political pressure from the regime not to do so.

The territory of the contemporary Macedonian state is, however, far from that of nineteenth-century irredentist ambition. The key element in Bulgarian irredentism then was the *Drang nach Saloniki*, the opening to the Aegean and the great port on the Vardar estuary. This would have transformed the economic and political potential of Bulgaria, to the detriment of Greece. It is a disturbing sign of the potential for this issue to re-emerge that the largest party in the current Macedonian parliament, the VPRO-DPNME, the lineal descendant of IMRO, has as its policy the recovery of these territories, and although the influence of this party in Skopje has declined in recent months, it nevertheless still exists as a major force.

There are also mainstream political parties in Bulgaria which share this ambition. But the economics of it all are doubtful. Macedonia now has little to offer Sofia except people, land and many problems, and no revision of the Greek border could be achieved without a major war. Greece has made it clear that it would call upon its Western military allies to assist its defence of the status quo, although given the nature of the Balkan crisis in 1991-2 it is perhaps doubtful how readily many of them would do so, given that the whole exercise would be strongly reminiscent of many forms of great power involvement in Balkan disputes in earlier periods. Apart from the diplomatic dimension, there is in Greece a great legacy of popular bitterness from memories of the Bulgarian occupation of parts of Greece during the Second World War, and there is no doubt that any Greek government, of whatever complexion, would have overwhelming popular support for more or less any imaginable policy directed towards the defence of Greek territorial integrity. It should also be noted that wider Macedonian attitudes to Bulgaria were affected in a similar way by the Bulgarian occupation there in the Second World War. But Bulgaria was the first country to recognize the independence of Macedonia, and doubtless plans to involve itself deeply in its affairs. It remains to be seen how far the natural struggle for a regional sphere of influence will be seen by other neighbouring states as an attempt at economic and later, political and military, integration. It is also possible that the long quiescent notion of a Balkan Federation will re-emerge as an expression of Bulgarian policy.

A European question

Perhaps the central short-term question for Europe is how far it is going to allow a Serbian—Greek stranglehold on Macedonia to develop. When the EC did not recognize the new state on 15 January 1992, it allowed time for this pressure to develop. The 1991 policy of Macedonian President Gligorov has failed, to the extent that there is no sign of the emergence of a new Yugoslav confederation between the remaining republics. It is independence or nothing. The possibility exists that a viable, if poor, small state could develop with Skopje as a capital if sufficient EC assistance is forthcoming, and a willingness in Brussels and the other EC capitals to stand up to Greek pressure. There is certainly a government in Macedonia now which is deeply—if, some may feel, a little naively—committed to a Europe without borders. But the window of opportunity may not last long: external political and internal economic pressures may encourage disintegration and violence if the Macedonians are left to their fate within the ruins of the old Yugoslavia. So perhaps it is possible to conclude with the thought that while the classic features of the Macedonian question are beginning to reappear in terms of population and territory, the area of decision already extends to a wider Europe, which was not always so in the past, and that the single great power of the European Community has replaced the competing northern European powers of the late nineteenth century. Whether this will mean the issue can be resolved more easily, though, is extremely doubtful, as EC initiatives so far in the region seem to founder on the contradiction that a transnational organization is a poor arbiter of the competing claims of new nationalisms.