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Away from Mass Protest in Italy: Moderating the Protest Culture through the European Union and Autonomy Seeking Movements

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The death of Lazio soccer fan, Gabriele Sandri, on 11 November 2007¹ sparked a mass protest in Italy reminiscent of the more tumultuous 1960s and 1970s. Protests after egregious events such as the one involving Gabriele Sandri are commonplace in most parts of the world and seek atonement for the wrongdoing. It is, in a number of ways, moral to protest these significant wrongdoings to help insure that they do not happen again. Protest, when it comes to bettering humanity, is a worthy cause.

However, there is much more to this story than reported in the media. Lazio, for example, is not just another soccer team in Rome. They are perhaps best renowned for being the team of Benito Mussolini and their connection with fascism did not peter out with the end of World War II. Indeed, recently retired star player, Paolo DiCanio, would often give the fascist salute to the fans during and after games.² This is not to imply that all Lazio fans are fascists, many enjoy the sport for the virtues of the game but there is a strong connection in Italy with calcio (soccer) and politics and Lazio with fascism. The death of Gabriele Sandri and the subsequent protests are, in all likelihood, quite virtuous in nature, but often these movements get caught up in other facets of extremist politics in Italy. This conflation of movements, in an earlier era, caused problems for the phenomenon known as “Sessantotto” and ultimately the romance of the protest movement subsided and more pragmatic goals took over.

“SESSANTOTTO” AND THE “LEAD YEARS”

Two very different trends emerged from the turbulent 1960s and 1970s in Italy. The first, relating to Sessantotto is the remembrance of

a romantic protest movement whereby the rights of workers and the middle class were fought for on the streets of Italy. The second trend, unfortunately, had much more to do with extremist politics. Violent clashes between fascist and communist groups brought significant negative attention to Italy. This created a sense of fear that communists would take over Italy which, in the specter of the Cold War, would have been disastrous for NATO and the West. Moreover, on the other extreme, there was a concern that Italy would resurrect its World War II past with an upsurge in support for fascism.

Italy, in the 1960s therefore, was in a state of significant flux. The population was transitioning from rural to urban areas, the economy was booming and a social revolution got underway.³ Consumerism advanced significantly and, in the course of a decade, Italy became a modern industrial state that belonged in the modern era with the rest of Western Europe. Yet because of the significant flux in society, Italians were unsure of who they were or where they were going. Some in society were appalled at the rising consumerism and reliance upon unequal capitalist distributions of wealth. Part of this frustration became the uprising of 1968.

1968 was a year of political, social and student protests seeking to improve the welfare of working class Italians. It took part in the larger global context of the civil rights movement in the United States, protests against the Vietnam War, the Cultural Revolution in China and the Prague Spring in Czechoslovakia among others. Certainly it was a year of upheaval and protest against the dominant institutions of the world. Moreover, Sessantotto was created out of a sense of New Left utopianism that sought to radically change the world. It was a movement founded upon radicalism but was not supposed to be based on violence, only peaceful protest.

Sessantotto started as a student protest advocating for better universities and reform of the blocked political system.⁴ At its core, Sessantotto was about improving the country and the rights of workers. However, after numerous clashes with police and right-wing activists, the movement took on more violent characteristics. It also led to the "Hot Autumn" of 1969 in which widespread strikes debilitated much of the Italian economy.⁵ Two groups emerged: *Lotta Continua* (continuing struggle) and *Potere Operaio* (worker's power) with whom the protest movement took on a more permanent role in Italian society. Furthermore, the Red Brigades terrorist organization formed in 1971 and took part in a campaign of kidnappings and rape even though

their initial targets had only been to harass factory owners on behalf of workers.⁶ The initial protest movement was already therefore, even in the early stages, being co-opted.

In a number of ways, Sessantotto sparked protests in Italy for over a decade which started and ended, most notably, with two bombings. Bombs were placed at Piazza Fontana in Milan in 1969 and at the Bologna train station in 1980 marking the beginning and end of the tumultuous "Lead Years" that stemmed from the co-opted Sessantotto.⁷ This contributed to a sense of unrest in Italy such that modern notions of terrorism became conflated with protest culture. Furthermore, notions of protecting Italy from the red menace and the terrorism of the Red Brigades became paramount to the future of the country and a significant reason to moderate the protest culture.⁸

In some of the academic literature, Sessantotto was known for its worker militancy which, starting in the Hot Autumn of 1969 grew throughout the 1970s and continued intermittently through the 1980s.⁹ The unions were incredibly powerful during this time and political cooperation was therefore quite limited. This led, in part, to economic problems and while the Italian economy grew steadily it came with high levels of inflation and price increases.¹⁰ From an economic standpoint, therefore, the fallout of Sessantotto after co-optation proved to be hurtful to the state.

The political context of Sessantotto is also important to consider when discussing the legacy of student protest in the late 1960s. Italy, due to its electoral system, has been governed by coalition governments since its transition back to democracy in 1946. Until 1992, when Italy transitioned to the "Second Republic," the country was dominated by the Christian Democrats with the Italian Communists serving as the main opposition party.¹¹ Unfortunately, due to the nature of coalition governance, governing a country can be extremely difficult when every political decision has to be compromised. In essence, Italians have a great deal of choice at the polls, more so than most other parliamentary democracies, but this means that it can be extremely difficult to govern the country and clear cut choices are rarely made. Sessantotto occurred in the backdrop of this indecision, which is why it protested the blocked political system. In some senses, the set-up of the system contributed to the rise of Sessantotto, which has significant implications for its legacy and why the protest movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s is much more revered in Italy than in other countries.

Furthermore, Sessantotto came at a time when television images became an increasingly popular mode of collecting and distributing information. Therefore, depending on political ideology, the movement became about the future direction of the country. Protest and the utopian sense of equality were enjoyed by supporters of the movement whereas its detractors disliked the disruptions to the economy and the violence that was depicting in the aftermath of protests.

The legacy of Sessantotto has been a mixed one because of its conflation with extremist politics. At its core, participants in Sessantotto fought for the improvement of worker's lives and working conditions. However, the means through which some of its successes were accomplished brought upon Italy a tarnished reputation especially in the business community about the stability of the country.

CROSSROADS

The movements of 1968, therefore, led Italy to a choice: moderation or extremism. Student protests, however utopian, are limited in what they can accomplish. With an advancing economy and an Italian society that was becoming more urban and reliant upon an improving standard of living, something had to be done to moderate the protest culture. Furthermore, with the violence and extremism that accompanied Sessantotto, the demise of the movement was hastened with some changes to the modern world.

This included other factors that were also at play in the midst of Sessantotto. As a founding member of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) at Paris in 1951, Italy has long been integrated in what is now the European Union (EU). This provided Italy with a choice: either moderate the protest culture and become part of an increasingly integrated Europe replete with significant economic benefits or maintain the protests and risk alienation from the union. As a founding member of what is now the EU, Italy was responsible for helping new members and providing a good example of democracy especially to Iberian countries transitioning to democracy in the 1970s.

Domestically, Italy was also changing which furthered greater calls for autonomy and local rule. Italy was created by the Risorgimento (unification) in 1861 from the aftermath of the Holy Roman Empire; an empire that had numerous autonomous regions including Tuscany, Parma-Piacenza, Lombarda-Veneto, Modena, Two Sicilies and the Papal

States. People were used to more local government and the upheavals of Sessantotto and beyond, in some senses, rekindled the desire for more local governmental decision making powers.

REASONS FOR THE PATH OF MODERATION

When Italy transitioned from fascism to democracy in the aftermath of World War Two, several countries on its periphery did not. As a result, if Italy were to provide an example to these countries and cement its transition to democracy, then it had to avoid reverting back to authoritarian governance and increasing instability which can be created through longstanding protests. Italy did become much more moderate which stands in stark contrast to the fissiparous ethnic conflict of its neighbor, the former Yugoslavia.

On the domestic front, Italy made a number of changes that helped moderate its populace, however, the main driver of this change was the EU and the economic benefits it brought with it. Italian public policy has, in numerous ways, been influenced by the EU and this has led to the ratification of unpopular legislation such as cuts to pensions and the health care system in the name of integration.¹²

Regionalism in Italy also became an issue of moderation. Much of the protests in 1968 were directed at the central state. In Italy, the governmental system is unitary which means that power is concentrated at the center. Part of Sessantotto's legacy, therefore, has been to reduce this power through growing regionalism and devolution. However, this may also have given rise to active separatist movements which may threaten the future of the Italian state.

There is no exact reason for why moderation occurred in Italy in the aftermath of Sessantotto but mass protests decreased after the 1970s and the movement lost much of its power. Several reasons account for the change including: a larger role of leadership in the world, liberal institutionalist demands of the EU and increasing regionalism and separatism in the country.

LEADERSHIP IN THE WORLD

Italy, depending on the source of the statistics, has the fifth to seventh largest economy in the world.¹³ With economic clout comes the desire to be a leader on the international stage. While there may be significant economic disparities across the country, this has not deterred Italians from trying to export their ideas throughout the world. The caveat with

this, however, is the need to be a good example if one is going to give advice to others.

In earlier eras, Italy looked to expand its influence abroad. In World War I, the Entente powers enticed Italy to switch sides in the war, through the 1915 Treaty of London, with the promise of receiving most of Croatia's Adriatic coast upon success.¹⁴ Indeed, in 1919 with the Treaty of Versailles, Italy did gain further territory on the border of what became the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (later renamed Yugoslavia). This was, in a significant sense, just the beginning of Italian involvement in the Balkans.

On at least two occasions in the modern era, Italy has played a role in the Balkans. Recently, some real discussion of Italy accepting Albania as a protectorate surfaced in order to help Albania fully transition to democracy and become a functioning state.¹⁵ It is a noble endeavor to assist countries in the Balkans with their problems but a difficult problem to manage. Moreover, Italy was part of the European Union and NATO delegations that helped to quell the Macedonian conflict of 2001 between Macedonians and ethnic Albanians¹⁶ and to protect Kosovo from further Serb atrocities in 1999.¹⁷ Therefore, in order to set itself apart from the former Yugoslavia and serve as a good example, Italy had to improve its own issues which it successfully did with the decrease of violence surrounding the protest culture.

On economic matters, the clout of the Italian economy has improved significantly since the end of World War II. Italy, along with France, saw dramatic growth after the 1960s to become the fourth (France) and fifth (Italy) largest economies in the world in the late 1990s.¹⁸ With increased economic clout comes increased responsibility globally and while Italy will never be a hegemon, its leadership through soft power is idolized throughout the world. Again, the notion of serving as an example to countries with economic ambitions to improve the living standards of its citizens is important to modern Italian politics and policies.

Lastly, Italians overwhelmingly support the EU with over 70 percent of the population supporting the supranational bloc in Eurobarometer data polling.¹⁹ Italians, in many ways, have done extraordinary things in the name of integration and continually seek approval in the bloc.²⁰ It is this desire to be part of something bigger than itself that has propelled Italy to greater influence in the world. This has only been possible through subduing risks of violence that are often associated with protest.

THE EUROPEAN UNION²¹

Italy's love affair with the EU has been a longstanding one that has stood the test of time. Indeed, Italy was prominent in the creation of the ECSC and was more than willing to put aside its fascist past in the name of increased integration that would increase economic cooperation and would later cement democracy, justice, the rule of law and human rights in the country. Italy considers its membership in the EU to be for the "higher political good" which has improved the country without drastically reducing its sovereignty.²²

The modern EU, in some ways, had its genesis in Italy. After the initial ECSC formed in Paris in 1951, the Treaty of Rome in 1957 furthered integration on behalf of the original six members of the organization becoming the European Economic Community (EEC). Integration was slow in the next few decades with some changes coming in the areas of agriculture and fisheries, among others, but it was not until later decades that the EU started functioning like more than just a free trade union.

In the early years before the first enlargement of 1973, the greatest issue facing the European Community (EC) was the poverty of the Italian south in comparison with the rest of the bloc.²³ The rural south, the "Mezzogiorno," is significantly poorer than the rest of Italy and the rest of the EC. Part of the EC's goal was to create a bloc that had a reasonable level of parity in terms of wealth and standard of living. Furthermore, the Mezzogiorno and parts of Ireland (after 1973) were targeted for redistributing funds under a Cohesion Funds plan for areas of the bloc that had less than 75% of the community average wealth.²⁴ Redistribution caused significant debate in the union, so most of the payments came in an ad hoc nature from Germany.

The Mezzogiorno, for much of the last half century, has been one of the poorer parts of the EU. This has only changed since the 2004 and 2007 enlargements of twelve new member states from Central and Eastern Europe. As such, there has been a decrease in redistribution to the south of Italy under the Cohesion Funds which redistributes money to the poorer regions of the union.

The issue of a regional Cohesion Fund to help bolster the economies of poorer regions of the EC almost became a crisis as discussions of a common currency emerged in the 1980s. Indeed, Italy did not want to join the economic monetary union (EMU) if payments to the poorer regions were denied. The United Kingdom and Ireland supported them

in this which could have dramatically changed Italy because it would have likely decreased its role in the EU.²⁵

Another reason for moderation under the EU was the Schengen Agreement of 1985. The agreement, named after the city in Luxembourg in which the agreement was signed, created the beginnings of a borderless Europe.²⁶ Schengen effectively abolished border controls for members of the EU that signed onto the agreement²⁷ in addition to three non-members: Iceland, Norway and Switzerland. With a reasonable responsibility to uphold and protect the other members of the organization, Italy had to insure a reasonable level of safety for citizens of the other EU member states traveling or working in the Italian state. This is one way that Europe is becoming increasingly unified which has served as a reminder to Italy to insure European standards of safety, economics and standard of living throughout its territory.

Despite little in the way of shared identity, Europe is becoming more integrated and its constitution (which thus far has failed) has the motto, *Unità nella diversità* (unity in diversity).²⁸ Europe is not likely to become a unified political state in the near future but, some argue, this may happen in the not-so-distant future. Italy, therefore, has a responsibility not only to uphold its own traditions but to be cautious of other traditions in a unified bloc. Under an increasingly integrated EU, Italy stands to lose a great deal if other member states do not want to operate in the country which, in turn, may lead to greater stress on the country if it is considered unstable in any way.

On economic matters, an ever closer union is important to Italy. Italy's adoption of the Euro in January 2002 has been a mainstay of Italian politics and is integral to the economic future of the country. It was not, however, as easy as just joining a group; very specific demands were placed on each member state that wanted to join the Eurozone. Of the fifteen members that were EU members at the time negotiations opened, only eleven successfully implemented the Euro on 1 January 2002. The United Kingdom, Sweden and Denmark all abstained from joining and the Greek currency was not functioning well enough to warrant membership at that time. Indeed, Italy too had difficulty especially with achieving the requirements for the exchange rate mechanism (ERM) but did manage to avoid missing the deadline.²⁹

The creation of the Euro and other EU related activities have increased integration in the EU which has, in some regards, led to increased regionalism in Italy. The industrial north has cottoned onto

the trend of greater European integration whereas the Mezzogiorno has been left behind. Therefore, the north of Italy trades far more with southern France and the Catalan region of Spain encompassing major links between Barcelona, Lyon and Milan.³⁰

As a result of increased trade, the EU has provided Italy with a great deal of wealth and prosperity. However, given the restraints of membership in the union, Italy has lost some autonomy and ability to establish its own policies. The legacy of Sessantotto, in this regard, has been minimized because of the need to moderate the protest culture of the 1970s. Sessantotto has not been without success, as many of the EU's policies have encompassed worker rights and safety, issues pivotal to the protests of the late 1960s and 1970s. In some small ways, Sessantotto has contributed to a better Europe in this regard.

Italy came to a crossroads with Sessantotto: it could either continue down the road of protest which was increasingly conflated with extremist politics or it could become more moderate. Perhaps its membership in the EU depended upon reducing instability in the form of mass street protest and capitulating to the economic and social demands of the EU. On the other hand, the driver of Sessantotto, the rights of people, is a steadfast pillar of how the EU functions. Economic parity is ascribed to whilst maintaining significant incentives for businesses to function and to profit.

REGIONALISM, AUTONOMY AND SEPARATISM

Italy is, despite its problems, a unitary state with power concentrated in its capital, Rome. It was set-up in this manner through its constitution of 1946 with the intent to concentrate power in a specific locale and govern the country from this area.³¹ A unitary state is supposed to operate with significant controls of all areas of the government; however, with the EU and increased assertions from the north, it is becoming increasingly federal. This means that the traditional seat of power in Italy, Rome, is beginning to have its power devolved from the center and given to the regions. This, in some regards, serves to pacify the protest movement because they can no longer protest the traditional seat of power. If power is increasingly being wielded from more local jurisdictions, then the romance of the protest movement diminishes because the people are not fighting against some monolith from the capital, but rather friends and neighbors in the local or regional government.

The path of moderation, however altruistic, has caused some concern for the Italian state. Since the unification of Italy in 1861 from small city-states of the Holy Roman Empire, politicians have attempted to build an Italian identity. This is, in some senses, where the north/south divide in Italy began. The state was prominent in the north but not so in the south.³²

With increased involvement in the EU, though, greater autonomy is being granted to the twenty regions of the country. In the modern context, Italy is being governed in an increasingly federal manner breaking from its unitary tradition. South Tyrol, for example, on the Austrian border has 280,000 German speaking residents who essentially operate in a German-Austrian society.³³ As a result of a 1979 Austrian law, many of the residents enjoy certain rights of Austrian citizens and their language and culture is completely Germanic. This eventually led to substantial autonomy for the region, one of five regions to be granted such freedom in Italy.

The debate over regionalism in Italy has emerged, in large measure, because of the electoral success of the Lega Nord (Northern League) political party.³⁴ In some ways the Lega Nord has invented an ethnicity for the North of Italy in order to protect the economic interests of the region from redistribution to the rest of the country. This is not something new in politics but it is seriously endangering the Italian state and separatism has become a real and viable issue. Economic interests, as purported by the Lega Nord, have a real impact on the legacy of Sessantotto because they stand in stark opposition to the student protest movement and what it stood for. Much like Isaac Newton's third law of motion: every action has an equal but opposite reaction, Sessantotto has an equal but opposite reaction in Italian politics. What started in 1968 as a protest movement has an impact on what happens in modern Italian politics. The protest against the central government in the 1960s and 1970s has, in part, led to increased demands for the decentralization of government through groups like Lega Nord and perhaps even secession.

Like other states in Western Europe, Italy is facing its share of secessionist problems. Identity may be an en vogue attitude amongst minority groups in modern Europe but traditional separatist claims do have some longevity. The most prominent separatist movement threatening the very existence of Italy is the Lega Nord political party. Their claims are to create an independent state out of the north and some of central Italy in an area known as "Padania." Padania is, in many senses, a different

place from the Mezzogiorno of rural southern Italy. Unemployment has been as high as 30% in the Mezzogiorno in the past decade which stands in contrast to the industrial weight of Padania.³⁵ The areas of Sicily, Calabria and Campania were the hardest hit in contrast to the 7.7% unemployment in the North and Center of the country.³⁶

The Lega Nord has become a real and viable threat to the unity of the Italian state after its breakthrough in the election of 1996 when it became the largest party in the north and the fourth most popular in all of Italy (despite only running in the north and some of the center of the country).³⁷ The 1996 election also marked a transition in its electoral strategy from promoting regionalism to promoting independence for Padania. As it pertains to Sessantotto, separatism has become an unintended consequence of increased regionalism stemming from the protest of the central government in 1968.

Sessantotto is relevant to modern day separatism in Italy because as a movement dedicated to removing class disparities, there is nothing greater in Italian politics than the economic difference between north and south. Protest, because of economic differences, has resulted in widening political views of people in different parts of the country. The Lega Nord has utilized these differences and much of its propaganda targets the south, Rome and a corrupted Roman Catholic Church.³⁸ Its platforms of fewer taxes, further integration in Europe, federalism and more economic growth stand, in large measure, in contrast with Sessantotto.

Furthermore, the Lega Nord was able to utilize the argument that Italian unitary government serves to redistribute wealth from the north to the south in its campaign and gain greater political strength.³⁹ This has, therefore, led to increased rhetoric for federalism and for the north to become more detached from the rest of the country. Indeed, in the election of April 1996, the Lega Nord changed its platform to advocate for independence rather than just autonomy from Rome.⁴⁰

The Lega Nord, as a political party, only runs in the north and center of Italy; yet, its electoral successes have caused a great number of problems for the unitary style governance of the state. As mentioned earlier, under a parliamentary democracy, when a given party accumulates significant electoral support they often have the opportunity to enter a coalition government and help to run the country.

Under the second Berlusconi administration (2001–05), the Lega Nord formed part of his coalition government.⁴¹ This was quite a precarious balancing act for the political party given its platform to provide

opposition and advocate for increased regionalism and potential secession from Italy. Yet the paradox of this was that the Lega Nord was part of the government as well. It is akin to the Bloc Quebecois forming part of the Canadian government or the Scottish National Party propping up one of the major parties in the United Kingdom. This scenario, under the parliamentary model, is quite difficult in Canada and the United Kingdom, but with a large numbers of parties and frequent coalitions, a very real possibility in Italy that occurred under Berlusconi's second administration.

Padania does not seem like it will become an independent state, at least not in the short run, so the Italian state will likely remain united. However, the legacy of Sessantotto is affected by the platforms of the Lega Nord because they stand in contrast to the ideas of Sessantotto much like Newton's conception of an equal but opposite reaction to force. The Lega Nord often emphasizes business, EU integration and opposition to taxation from Rome for the purposes of redistribution to the Mezzogiorno. Sessantotto, it would seem, effected Italian society which caused an equal but opposite reaction.

CONCLUSION

Italy, along with other states across the developed world, is still at risk for mass protest. This is not necessarily a bad thing, and often leads to positive change, but may endanger the economic progress of a country and spill over into widespread violence. Furthermore, in the case of Italy, protest is often conflated with extremist politics. The glamour of the Sessantotto era is one that its supporters look upon fondly but its legacy has to be removed from the baggage the violence that often accompanied the protests.

As a result of the conflation between protest for worker's rights and extremist politics, Italy came to a crossroads in the late 1970s: moderate its politics or risk being ostracized by its EU neighbors. Italy chose the path of moderation which was seen through its uses of soft power in helping to lead the world, its membership in the EU and increased federalism which provided greater autonomy to certain areas. The specter of separatism, however, now looms and the future unity of Italy may well depend on relations between the north and south and between the north and Rome.

Finally, Sessantotto may have served its purpose if Italy became more moderate after the 1970s. A movement can only change so much

of a state before it radically alters the status quo. Since Sessantotto had radical goals in the first place, its successes may be seen through greater social welfare and greater unity in the Italian state because class-based differences would have decreased. Only the first has happened and, therefore, in some regards, Sessantotto has a mixed record. It has done a great deal to help the working class but may have done so at the expense of the unity of the Italian state if the Lega Nord continues to do well politically. Indeed, every action has an equal but opposite reaction.

Sessantotto should be remembered for what it did to positively affect Italy and the rest of Europe. This means that it needs to be disentangled with the violence and extremism that also came from the same era. Sessantotto should be given credit for successfully protecting the rights of workers throughout Europe but also not hindering economic growth and personal freedoms of people. It was a remarkable era when it was disentangled from much of the accompanying baggage of the era and while it may be a bit utopian, its legacy is one of improvements for Italy and the rest of Europe.

Protest, specifically in the late 1960s, is part of Italy's heritage and is revered in certain circles across the world. Periodically, protests like the one over the death of Gabriele Sandri, remind Italy and the world of an earlier era when people took to the streets to fight injustice and ineffective government. It is, however, a mixed legacy because with the utopianism of Sessantotto came a conflation with extremist politics. This unfortunately has become the paradox of the movement and one that should be clarified in light of modern changes the Italian state.

Notes

Author's Note: The author would like to thank Sarah A. Carey and Lucia Re for their critiques of earlier drafts of this manuscript.

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2. See BBC News, 'Footballer's 'Fascist Salute' row,' 9 January 2005.

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5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.

7. McCarthy, Patrick. *The Crisis of the Italian State: from the Origins of the Cold War to the Fall of Berlusconi*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995.

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10. Ibid.

11. McCarthy, 1999.

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16. See BBC News, 'British troops land in Macedonia,' 24 August 2001.

17. See BBC News, 'Troops ready for Serb reprisals,' 25 March 1999.

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20. Gallo and Hanny.

21. The EU has had many names in its history. It started as the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) in 1951, became the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1957, the European Community (EC) in 1967 and the European Union (EU) in 1991. The appropriate name is used at various junctures in history throughout the paper.

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25. George.

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27. Ireland and the United Kingdom did not sign on to Schengen.

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