Political Data in 2000

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In contrast to 1999, in which the Kosovo crisis and the election of the European Parliament imposed some commonality on politics, at least within the NATO and EU member states, the year 2000 was characterized by important, but largely unrelated, political events in the 28 countries reviewed in this issue.¹ There were, however, several exceptions to this pattern of national idiosyncrasy.

Three exceptions focused on the European Union. Among the European non-members, the prospect, or desirability, of membership were virtually universally important issues. In the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland, the on-going negotiations for accession and the economic reforms required were important issues. In Iceland, Malta, and Switzerland, on the other hand, the question was whether or not it would be desirable to join the EU at all.

The second EU-related commonality primarily revolved around EMU and the economic constraints imposed on governments by the Maastricht criteria. The specific manifestation of this issue depended on whether or not the country was part of the euro-zone, and on national economic circumstances. With its booming economy, Ireland was falling afoul of the allowable limits on inflation, while in Greece (newly admitted to the euro-zone) the problem was inflation coupled with persistently high unemployment, and in Austria the problem was deficit reduction. In Sweden, the question of EMU membership divided the Social Democratic Party (which after avoiding the issue took a pro-EMU position), as well as dividing the minority Social Democratic government from the Euro-sceptic Left and Green parties on which it often depended for parliamentary support; the Swedish Christian Democrats changed their position on EMU from opposition to support, reflecting a general consensus among the European political elite (with the obvious—or perhaps only the strategic B exception of the British) that EMU mem-

¹ Unfortunately, the entry for Luxembourg was not received in time to include in this Yearbook.
bership is necessary whether or not it is otherwise desirable. That this view is not necessarily shared by the electorate was demonstrated by the Danish referendum in September, in which euro-zone membership was rejected by the voters, notwithstanding that it has been endorsed by parties representing 77 percent of the electorate. Rumblings of this divergence between elites and electorates were also heard in Ireland on the subject of the Nice Treaty, ratification of which would be rejected by the voters in 2001.

The third EU-related issue stemmed from the decision to impose sanctions on Austria as a way of signaling disapproval of the inclusion the Freedom Party in the national government. Not surprisingly, this action was widely resented in Austria, and may indeed have backfired by strengthening the Freedom Party’s position. The sanctions also proved politically significant in other countries – most notably Finland and Denmark (where it contributed to the defeat of the EMU referendum) – not because of sympathy for the Freedom Party or its leader Jrg Haider, but because the sanctions were seen as an example of unacceptable intrusion by the EU into the domestic affairs of a democratic member state.

A fourth widespread commonality was not so much an issue as a concern – the continuing decline of turnout in elections at all levels, and in virtually all countries. Several countries have tried to address the alienation from which this trend is presumed to stem with institutional reforms to improve the democratic performance of their political systems. Prominent among these reforms have been devolution and electoral reforms, including the introduction of procedures for national referenda. Whether these steps will have any effect in an environment of apparent elite unwillingness to accept the judgement of the people (highlighted in 2001 by the “they’ll just have to vote again until they get it right” reaction to the Irish rejection of the Nice Treaty) remains to be seen.

A second reason to doubt that such institutional reforms will have a serious impact on citizen alienation is that, as in previous years, the revelation and investigation of official wrong-doing or incompetence increasingly is becoming a part of normal political life. Examples reported in this Yearbook include Belgium, Germany, Ireland, and Portugal.

The process of democratic and market-economic reforms continued to be important in the countries that had been under Soviet domination. While most of the necessary legal and institutional reforms are in place, the development of the cultural norms required appears to be proving more difficult, particularly in Slovakia.

Questions of peace and security continued to dominate politics in Israel, but the problem of separatist violence was also significant in Spain and in France, and its potential escalation was, as always, of concern in Northern