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Greek Church Waves the Flag in Nation's Identity Crisis

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ROME — Last Monday, the European Union tapped Greece to become the latest member to adopt the euro as a common currency. The approval was recognition that Greece, and its newly trimmed economy, was ready to join the club of modern Europe.

On Wednesday, Orthodox Church leaders gathered hundreds of thousands of protesters carrying Greek flags and crucifixes in what was the second mass demonstration this month to protest the government's decision to remove religious affiliation from state identity cards, which brings it in line with other members of the European Union.

The government views the change as a way to protect minorities and a natural step on the path to European integration and custom. The church, however, views it as an assault on Greek nationalism and identity, and its own authority. "Resist, my dear Christians," Archbishop Christodoulos told cheering crowds. "The

forces of globalization and religious marginalization are out to get us."

The clash between national identity and the homogenized political values of a newly integrated Europe is found in other countries eager to be let in. These days, Greece is a society tugged in opposite directions, as it tries to reconcile its past with its uncertain future.

NEWS ANALYSIS It is a member of the European Union and of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, yet it is also the poorest country in the European Union and the only one where the Orthodox faith is dominant. Although the country has placed its economic future in Europe, it is also a Balkan nation, bound by history and geography to ancient, unresolved conflicts and festering grievances.

Church and state are not separate in Greece, where 97 percent of the population is Orthodox, and the constitution stipulates that the Orthodox religion is dominant. The country's small Muslim minority is viewed with suspicion by many Greeks who are insecure about

Turkey and who view the recent waves of immigration, particularly from Albania, as a source of crime and unemployment.

The country has not taken the same steps to eradicate leftist terrorism that Germany and Italy took in the 1980s. The Greek terrorist organization November 17, which earlier this month took responsibility for the assassination of the British defense attaché in Athens, has committed hundreds of assassinations and bombings in the last 25 years without a single arrest. Greece's failure to combat terrorism successfully is one of the most glaring clashes between the country and its Western partners. The American ambassador to Greece, Nicholas Burns, called terrorism "the defining issue between Greece's past and future." There are others.

Greece's loyalty to its allies was most sharply put to the test during the NATO bombing campaign in Yugoslavia. The Socialist government of Prime Minister Costas Simitis felt bound to support, or at least not inhibit, the allied bombing

campaign, but 99 percent of Greek citizens fiercely opposed the war, prompted by sympathy for the Serbs, who share their faith, and a deeply ingrained anti-Americanism forged when Washington supported the military junta that ruled Greece from 1969 to 1974.

Membership in the euro brings economic and social upheavals that worry many who may not immediately benefit from a new global economy.

"The church doesn't exactly speak for them, but it is expressing their anxieties," said Nikiforos Diamandoros, a political science professor who is also Greece's ombudsman.

The country's large population of self-employed small-business men and civil servants are two groups least likely to thrive under globalization, he said. "People who feel threatened by a new economic order have conflated the state identity card with cultural identity," Mr. Diamandoros said.

Nationalism has lost some of its political edge as Greece seeks integration with Europe and rapprochement with Turkey,

but insecurity about the economic and social costs of assimilation has helped it resurface. While Mr. Simitis's Socialist party, PASOK, has shed much of the leftist populism of the past and toed a more centrist, pro-European line, along with the opposition party, the Greek Orthodox Church has filled the vacuum.

Perhaps emboldened by the popularity of its anti-NATO stance during the war in Kosovo, the church has asserted itself more strongly of late. The church is worried that the country plans to institute a separation of church and state, which among other things would drastically reduce church income.

The battle over the identity cards hit a nerve throughout Greek society. More than 70 percent support adopting the euro, viewing it as a passport to economic growth and stability.

Yet, in a recent poll, 40 percent said they supported the church's stance on identity cards. And that seems to be less about religious fervor than the tension between Greece's traditionalist past and modern future.