

## Tomorrow's conundrum of Europe

Excitement over developments in Eastern Europe should be moderated by a recognition of the chauvinistic dangers that it brings. What Europe needs is a moratorium on boundary changes. German reunification is best postponed.

MALTA's role in European affairs has not been conspicuous since the ending of the Crusades, while the meeting on (rather than, as originally intended, off) the island between Presidents Mikhail Gorbachev and George Bush will not have restored much of its influence. That it allowed the two men to smile often and openly in each other's presence is, of course, a plus; the more serious business on arms control planned for next June should now be the more easily carried through. Each, no doubt, will now also be more confident that the other is seriously seeking to divert military spending to civil causes — the US administration seems to have seized more eagerly on the chance to cut spending than other members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. The federal deficit plainly nags like toothache. The Soviet deficit, relatively even larger, is for the time being bridged by printing money; no wonder that Gorbachev is pleased that his new friend, Bush, may use his economic influence (but not his cheque-book) to help *perestroika* along. Whether that will help during the long winter is another matter.

What seems to have foxed the two presidents at the weekend (the weather apart) is the turmoil in Europe. They are not alone in that. Monolithic regimes in Eastern Europe have been collapsing like dominoes since the Soviet Union let it be known that it would not prevent political change in Poland, now almost a democracy if an impoverished one. But that does not mean that Gorbachev has lost control. He seems resolute in telling ancient leaders that they cannot stand in the way of history and equally determined that the East European states should stay within the Warsaw Pact, German nostalgia notwithstanding. The benefits? The expectation that the conservatives in the Soviet Union will understand that what goes for Eastern Europe also applies to them. But the pace of change has left even Gorbachev wanting for a tangible description of what he means by a "common European home". Bush is as perplexed.

It is a perplexing business. Three years from now, at the end (not the beginning) of 1992, the European Communities hope to be a true common market and thus, in due course, a dominating economic force in Europe. The chiefly French fear that the process will be interrupted by ambitions for the reunification of East and West Germany are not over-serious: the frenzy of the past few weeks will soon abate, to be replaced by mutual recognition that reunification is at best a distant prospect. Why

should two of Europe's three-and-a-third German-speaking countries (counting Switzerland ungenerously as a third) consider they have no choice but to turn the clock back almost half a century, especially when their boundaries have changed considerably since 1939 and when there are much more interesting avenues for them to explore?

The interest of Europe is its diversity. So much can be told from comparing a journey from Stockholm to Naples with one from, say, Omaha (Nebraska) to Austin (Texas), roughly the same distance. It is remarkable that the countries of Eastern Europe have kept their own distinctive character throughout the past 40 years. Now there will be even more diversity to conjure with. The danger is that its interest will be complicated by ethnic or, more accurately, linguistic tensions. Many of the new near-democracies are artificial states, glued together at Versailles and Yalta, after the First and Second World Wars. The temptation now will be to unravel these ancient packages, reuniting patches on the map of Europe as if solving a jigsaw puzzle, sometimes even carrying out gigantic programmes of 'repatriation'.

These temptations are natural, but should be suppressed by those in whom they arise. In the present heady atmosphere, people may forget that the Second World War began with hankerings of this kind. What Europe most needs now is a moratorium on external boundary changes. Internal changes are a different matter; if people thrown together in some past jigsaw game so dislike each other, fission should be allowed. Nobody would wish the present state of Belgium on, say, Czechoslovakia, but there must be better ways of letting people sense that they are in charge of their own affairs. That is why German reunification would be a bad precedent.

The better bet for everybody is that mobility, allowed for and even encouraged by the Helsinki agreements of 1979, should have a chance to make all European states more prosperous. A precondition would be that the members of the European Communities should be at least as open to other European states as they are to each other. That may be easier now that Europe's superpower hankerings have been attenuated with the cold war whose fighting kept them alive. Gorbachev's common European home might then be a collection of smaller communities, a kind of Switzerland writ large. Maybe that is what he is driving at even in the Soviet Union. □