

# EUROPE IN TRANSITION

## Lesson 5: European Culture and Society

The European Union (EU) is actively committed to enhancing the cultural landscape of the continent. For example, in order to “highlight the richness and diversity of European cultures and ... promote greater mutual acquaintance between European Union citizens,” the Europeans created the “European Capital of Culture” project in 1985.<sup>1</sup> Annually, this initiative allows member states to nominate cities that have made significant contributions to regional culture. In 2007, Luxembourg and the Romanian city of Sibiu were named European Capitals of Culture; in 2008, Liverpool received the title.

However, while Europeans attempt to bring attention to their diversity through such projects, a variety of often crosscutting forces are changing cultural mores across the region. This update touches on three key areas discussed in *Europe in Transition*: 1) religion, 2) immigration, and 3) unification.

### Religion

(insert before “Education” on page 227)

Attitudes toward religion in Europe are as diverse as Europeans themselves. According to a survey conducted by the European Commission, at least 80 percent of citizens in Cyprus, Malta, and Poland indicate that religion is important to them. These numbers contrast with opinions in the Czech Republic and Sweden, where less than 30 percent indicate the same feeling.<sup>2</sup> However, while in many countries church attendance has significantly declined, for many Europeans religion and religious institutions often carry an important cultural and social aspect. For example, in Denmark, only 3 percent of people attend church on a weekly basis, but 74 percent believe that religious institutions are important.<sup>3</sup> Danes also contribute almost 1 percent of their incomes to support their national church, which they consider a part of their culture.<sup>4</sup>

The proposed constitution for the European Union brought the continent’s alignment with a specific set of religious values into public debate when several countries, led by Poland and Spain, sought to insert a reference to Christianity into the document. The motion was not approved despite Pope John Paul II’s high-profile support.

### Immigration

(insert before “European Unification” on page 234)

Millions of immigrants, both legal and illegal, live in European countries. Austria, Belgium, Germany, France, the Netherlands, Sweden, and Switzerland are among those with the largest immigrant populations. In Austria, for instance, immigrants constitute 13 percent of the country’s population.<sup>5</sup> A significant number are from other continents, especially from former European colonies. Over time, many have adopted European cultural mores and have become part of their new societies, which, for the most part, welcome the newcomers. According to Eurobarometer, almost three-quarters of EU citizens believe that people with a different ethnic, religious, or national background enrich the cultural life of their countries.<sup>6</sup> To encourage openness to cultural diversity, the European Union established 2008 as the “European Year of Intercultural Dialogue.”

Still, discrimination against immigrants persists as their numbers grow, and some do not assimilate to their new societies. There are also heated debates about immigrants' effects on jobs, Europe's generous welfare systems, and Europe's culture and identity.

Illegal immigration to Europe is a significant problem. Every year, millions of immigrants attempt to reach Europe, often risking death, in search of a better life. Organized crime syndicates frequently exploit immigrant desperation. In 2007, it was estimated that there were between 4.5 million and eight million illegal immigrants in Europe.<sup>7</sup>

The rising presence of Muslim immigrants in several western European countries is an important demographic pattern altering that region's culture. It has been estimated that more than 4 percent of the population in France, the Netherlands, Germany, and other western European countries follows Islam.<sup>8</sup> The Muslim influence is often being met with resistance and even hostility. As noted in Lesson 2 of *Europe in Transition*, some far-right political groups have exploited anti-Muslim sentiment to achieve modest electoral success. Acts of violence ascribed to Islamic extremists, highlighted by terrorist bombings in Madrid and London, and the killing of a Dutch filmmaker, Theo van Gogh, contribute to public anxiety. Political authorities have sometimes responded by enacting laws with vaguely discriminatory overtones. The most prominent example is the 2004 ban on conspicuous religious symbols in French public schools, which effectively ended the wearing of headscarves by female Muslim students. In 2005, several weeks of nightly riots by immigrants in France brought international attention to the difficult issues they face and the controversy that surrounds them.

In comparison to western Europe, immigration to central Europe is small. However, in countries that previously were solely a source of immigrants, inward immigration is a new phenomenon of the last decade. Many central Europeans migrate to the west for better employment opportunities, creating labor shortages in their home countries. Due to these labor shortages, countries in need of skilled workers opened their borders for immigrants from eastern Europe, Russia, and Asia. For example, since 1989, Poland has received thousands of immigrants from Ukraine, Russia, eastern Germany, and Vietnam, who now constitute about 2 percent of the country's population.<sup>9</sup> In the Czech Republic, immigrants represent 4.9 percent of the population.<sup>10</sup>

## **European Unification**

(insert after paragraph 3 on page 235)

With the expansion of the European Union to 27 members, some feared that closer integration and the formation of a common European identity would be hindered. The new countries have different cultures, historical experiences, and political backgrounds. However, according to a Eurobarometer poll, more people in the new members states (72 percent) are proud to be European than in the old ones (56 percent).<sup>11</sup>

In the wake of greater integration, Europe's open borders, and an unprecedented degree of mobility, a European identity is slowly emerging. Fifty-four percent of the EU citizens see themselves as citizens of both their country and Europe, in comparison to 43 percent of people who say they are citizens only of their country.<sup>12</sup> This new identity is driven by

a growing number of young Europeans, often called Generation E, who are multilingual and multicultural. The ERASMUS program, which promotes transnational cooperation among universities across Europe, gives European students an opportunity to study abroad. Over the last 20 years of the program's existence, 1.5 million young people have studied in a European country that is not their home country.<sup>13</sup>

This "Europeanization" of the continent is fueling a debate about what it means to be European. Unlike national identity, which is generally based on such factors as religion and language, a "European identity" may be more of a set of certain values, such as democracy, human rights, social justice, the importance of diplomatic solutions, and protection of the environment.

*For more recent information, please visit the timelines at [www.southerncenter.org](http://www.southerncenter.org).*

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<sup>1</sup> "Decision 1419/1999/ec of the European Parliament and of the Council of 25 May 1999 establishing a Community action for the European Capital of Culture event for the years 2005 to 2019," *Official Journal of the European Communities*, July 1, 1999.

<sup>2</sup> Special Eurobarometer, "European Social Reality," (European Commission), February 2007, [http://ec.europa.eu/public\\_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs\\_273\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs_273_en.pdf) (accessed March 19, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> The Gallup Organization, "Religion in Europe: Trust Not Filling the Pews," September 21, 2004.

<sup>4</sup> William Underhill, "Remodeling the Churches," *Newsweek*, February 12, 2007.

<sup>5</sup> Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, "OECD Factbook 2007 – Environmental, Economic, and Social Statistics," Table: Foreign-born and Foreign Populations, <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/15/37/38336539.pdf> (accessed April 10, 2008).

<sup>6</sup> Eurobarometer, "Intercultural Dialogue in Europe: Summary," (European Commission), December 2007, [http://www.interculturaldialogue2008.eu/fileadmin/downloads/documents/630-factsfigures/fl\\_217\\_sum\\_en.pdf](http://www.interculturaldialogue2008.eu/fileadmin/downloads/documents/630-factsfigures/fl_217_sum_en.pdf) (accessed April 10, 2008).

<sup>7</sup> Stanley Kurtz, "Immigration Crackdown," *National Review*, June 25, 2007.

<sup>8</sup> Euro-Islam, "Country Profiles", [http://www.euro-islam.info/spip/rubrique.php3?id\\_rubrique=24](http://www.euro-islam.info/spip/rubrique.php3?id_rubrique=24) (accessed January 30, 2008)

<sup>9</sup> United Nations Economic Commission on Europe, "UNECE Countries in Figures 2007," <http://www.unece.org/stats/profiles2007/> (accessed May 31, 2008).

<sup>10</sup> Op. cit. OECD Factbook 2007.

<sup>11</sup> Eurobarometer 66 "Public Opinion in the European Union," (European Commission), September 2007, [http://ec.europa.eu/public\\_opinion/archives/eb/eb66/eb66\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb66/eb66_en.pdf) (accessed April 22, 2008).

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> European Commission, "Education and Training 2010: The Erasmus Programme," [http://ec.europa.eu/education/news/erasmus20\\_en.html](http://ec.europa.eu/education/news/erasmus20_en.html) (accessed April 10, 2008).