

Encyclopedic Entry

Europe: Human Geography

Culture and Politics

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Europe is the second-smallest [continent](#). The name Europe, or *Europa*, is believed to be of Greek origin, as it is the name of a princess in Greek [mythology](#). The name Europe may also come from combining the Greek roots *eur-* (wide) and *-op* (seeing) to form the phrase “wide-gazing.”

Europe is often described as a “[peninsula](#) of peninsulas.” A peninsula is a piece of land surrounded by water on three sides. Europe is a peninsula of the Eurasian supercontinent and is bordered by the Arctic Ocean to the north, the Atlantic Ocean to the west, and the Mediterranean, Black, and Caspian seas to the south.

Europe’s main peninsulas are the Iberian, Italian, and Balkan, located in southern Europe, and the Scandinavian and Jutland, located in northern Europe. The link between these peninsulas has made Europe a dominant [economic](#), social, and cultural force throughout recorded history.

Europe’s [physical geography](#), [environment](#) and [resources](#), and [human geography](#) can be considered separately.

Today, Europe is home to the citizens of Albania, Andorra, Austria, Belarus, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Kosovo, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Macedonia, Malta, Moldova, Monaco, Montenegro, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Russia, San Marino, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, Ukraine, the United Kingdom (England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland), and Vatican City.

Cultural Geography

Europe has a long history of human development and is considered the birthplace of [Western Civilization](#). Today, this cultural wealth is used to solidify the European Community and is exported to the rest of the world as one of the continent’s greatest global assets.

Historic Cultures

Indigenous cultures shaped, and were shaped by, the varied geography of Europe. Physical features, [weather-related phenomena](#), and local resources had a deep impact on how historic European cultures prospered, interacted, and believed their world worked.

The geography and climate of the Mediterranean region, for example, directly influenced Greek mythology. Most Greek gods and goddesses are representations of the active physical elements that made up the local landscape. The volcanoes of Lemnos, an island in the Mediterranean, and Mount Etna, on the island of Sicily, were believed to be the forges of Hephaestus, the Greek god of fire. Ancient Greeks also believed [reigning](#) gods imprisoned lesser

gods underneath the volcanoes. A volcano's violent nature thus came from the work of Hephaestus and the anger of the imprisoned gods.

The ancient Greeks' connection to the sea also deeply influenced their mythological beliefs. Greece's many earthquakes, and the [tsunamis](#) they caused, were connected to the sea god Poseidon, known as the "Earth Shaker." Cults and temples centered on Poseidon were built throughout the Aegean and Mediterranean seas as a means of appeasing the god.

As [maritime trade](#) and exploration developed in the region, winds and currents connected to Poseidon became important in Greek mythology. The gods could both reward and punish travelers and traders with favorable or unfavorable sea conditions. This is a main theme of *The Odyssey*, an epic poem written by Homer, in which these key elements of the sea both help and hurt the hero.

Other cultures developed around the unique resources at their disposal. The Sami culture of [Scandinavia](#), for example, was deeply connected to the [indigenous](#) reindeer herds of the Arctic. The Sami followed and cared for these herds during their grazing cycle. During the harsh winter, the Sami ate all parts of the animal. They created clothing and tents out of reindeer [hides](#), sewing together the cloth with [twine](#) made from the animal's [tendons](#).

Keeping track of herds and individual animals became increasingly important in Sami life. In order to [distinguish](#) herds, families and communities developed a pattern of cuts and notches on the animals' ears.

Reindeer were also the Sami's main method of transporting goods during their [nomadic](#) journeys. These journeys varied in length, depending on the migration patterns of specific reindeer herds. Some reindeer herds have a home range of up to 5,000 square kilometers (1,930 square miles).

Reindeer herding is still an important aspect of Sami culture, which continues to thrive in northern Scandinavia and Russia's Kola Peninsula.

Distinct physical features had a lasting impact on how European cultures communicated with each other. With its central European location but geographic remoteness, the Alps region developed into a unique crossroads for Europe's dominant languages, and a refuge for its [archaic](#) languages. This linguistic diversity is present in the Alpine regions of many contemporary European countries today.

Switzerland, for example, has four official languages: German, French, Italian, and Romansch. During the Middle Ages, dominant European powers conquered the strategically important mountain territory of the Alps. Around 400 CE, the Alemanni, a Germanic tribe, invaded present-day northern Switzerland. Today, this is the German-speaking region of the country.

Around this same time, Roman conquerors took over present-day southern Switzerland. [Latin](#), the language of Rome, evolved into French in the western region, and Italian in the south. Because of their remoteness, however, all these regions have distinct [dialects](#) that differ slightly from their parent language. Swiss-Italian is distinguishable from Italian.

Romansch, an [endangered](#) language, is also derived from Latin. Fewer than a million people are fluent in Romansch. The language survives in Switzerland because of the remote location of its native speakers.

Contemporary Cultures

Europe's rich and diverse cultural heritage continues to [flourish](#) today. With such a large number of nationalities compacted into such a small area, Europe strongly supports individual cultural identities and products.

The European Capitals of Culture program, started in 1985, has become one of Europe's most important and high-profile cultural events. The goals of the program are local, regional, and global. The program highlights Europe's

rich cultural diversity, celebrates its cultural ties, and brings people of different European backgrounds together. The program has provided a lasting economic boost to cities and regions, raised their international profiles, and [enhanced](#) their images in the eyes of their own inhabitants.

Each year, two or three cities are chosen to produce a year-long program of cultural events. This program must not only highlight the city's unique cultural heritage, but also feature new events that unite a range of cultural practices from across Europe. All of the events must come together under a common theme or themes. One Capital of Culture of 2011, Turku, Finland, focused on culture's positive influence on health and well-being. Many of its events encouraged community involvement and [civic engagement](#). Projects are meant to stay a part of the city after 2011—some pieces of sculpture may be used for athletics, for instance. Turku officials hope to inspire other European countries to undertake similar projects.

Europe also strengthens ties between its diverse peoples and cultures by supporting multilingual education. The European Union has 23 official languages, and the continent has more than 60 indigenous languages. Flourishing [immigrant](#) communities are bringing in new languages to the continent, including Arabic, Hindi, and Mandarin.

A 2006 European study showed that 53 percent of respondents could speak a second language, while 28 percent could speak two foreign languages. The study also showed that only 8 percent of respondents considered language-learning unimportant.

The European Union has adopted a multilingual language policy with the goal that everyone should be able to speak at least two languages in addition to their own. By supporting this policy, the European Union hopes it will strengthen social, educational, professional, and economic ties in Europe and make the continent more competitive in global markets.

Europe's cultural products also help unify the region. Certain countries and regions have even developed an identity or "branding" focused on specific products and exports.

Scandinavian design, for instance, is primarily focused on fashion and home wares. It is characterized by simple, [minimalist](#) design and low-cost mass production. Important Scandinavian companies focused on designed products include Electrolux, which makes home electronics, and Ikea and H&M, famous around the world for inexpensive but well-designed home furnishings and clothing, respectively.

Italian fashion is also an important cultural export. The city of Milan is regarded as a major fashion capital, hosting an international fashion week twice a year. The city is home to the headquarters of luxury brands such as Valentino, Gucci, Versace, and Prada. Milan is also home to important European fashion magazines, such as *Grazia*, *Vogue Italia*, and *Vera*.

German automotive design has a global reputation for excellence and [prestige](#). Automobile companies such as BMW, Mercedes, and Audi are known throughout the world for creating cars with dynamic designs and an engaging driving experience. The country is also home to a number of outstanding schools for automotive design, such as the Hochschule Esslingen and Hochschule Pforzheim.

Political Geography

Europe's long history and economic progress have been shaped by its [political geography](#). Political geography is the internal and external relationships between [governments](#), citizens, and territories. Early Europeans, in fact, shaped global ideas of citizenship and government. These ideas have been tested during times of peace and military conflict, and continue to be redefined today.

Historic Issues

Europe's early political history can be traced back to ancient Greece and Rome, both of which profoundly affected

how Western civilizations govern their territories and citizens.

Described as the birthplace of [democracy](#), ancient Greece revolved around the *polis*, or city-state. City-states were unique in that they were governed not by a [hereditary](#) ruler, but by a political body that represented its citizens. This idea of citizenship—of being connected to and having a voice in your community—became the basic building block of democracy. The word “democracy” has Greek roots: *demos-*, meaning “people,” and *-kratos*, meaning “power.” Prominent Greek [philosophers](#), such as Socrates and Plato, discussed democratic ideals in their writings. Philosophers and politicians have used these writings to uphold and defend the democratic tradition ever since.

Roman civilization had a major influence on Western concepts of law, government, and the military. At its largest, Rome controlled approximately 6.5 million square kilometers (2.5 million square miles) of land.

The Roman approach to conquering and controlling territory is often considered to be the basis of Western [imperialism](#). Imperialism is a policy of extending a nation’s power and influence through [diplomacy](#) or military force. Imperialism is a policy that has been used throughout history, most notably by European powers and the United States. Other political institutions of Rome [persist](#) throughout Europe and former European colonies. Some of these concepts include the idea of an elected Senate and the stationing of military [troops](#) outside a country’s home region.

World War I and World War II dramatically affected the political geography of Europe. World War I (1914-1918) left about 16 million people dead. The Central Powers (led by the German Empire, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and the Ottoman Empire) fell to the forces of the Allied Powers (led by the United Kingdom, France, and the Russian Empire). By the end of the war, the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires collapsed and broke into a dozen separate nations. [Borders](#) between existing nations, such as Poland and Russia, were entirely redrawn.

World War II (1939-1945) left about 43 million Europeans dead, including about 6 million who died in the [Holocaust](#). The Holocaust was the mass murder of Jews under the Nazi regime. World War II also left more than 40 million [refugees](#), contributed to the independence of European colonies throughout the world, and [devastated](#) the urban [infrastructure](#) of many European cities.

As a result of the devastation of World War II, Western Europe’s leadership in global politics diminished. The United States began to lead the Western world, while the [Soviet Union](#), with its capital in the Eastern European city of Moscow, Russia, led the so-called Eastern Bloc. The relationship between the United States, with a [free-market economy](#), and the Soviet Union, with a [communist economy](#), was known as the Cold War.

The “Iron Curtain” represents Europe’s political geography during the Cold War. The Iron Curtain was an [ideological](#) boundary that divided Europe into two blocs—Western countries influenced by the United States, and Eastern countries influenced by the Soviet Union. International economic and military organizations developed on either side of the Iron Curtain. The United States and the Soviet Union built up huge [nuclear arsenals](#), with many missiles aimed at targets throughout Europe.

The Iron Curtain took on the physical shape of border defenses, walls, and limited diplomacy. The nation of Germany was divided in two. In fact, the most famous symbol of the Iron Curtain was the [Berlin Wall](#), which divided the East German city of Berlin into western and eastern-controlled parts.

The economic and political demise of the Soviet Union led to the end of the Iron Curtain in the late 1980s. During this time, a number of anti-communist [revolutions](#) swept central and eastern Europe. These revolutions eventually lead to the end of the Cold War, symbolized by the falling of the Berlin Wall in 1989.

Contemporary Issues

Europe is now broadly defined in the context of the [European Union](#) (EU), an economic and political body officially created by the Maastricht Treaty in 1993. The EU works to create a unified structure for social, environmental,

military, and economic policies of its member states.

Today, the European Union is composed of 27 member states, with new members mainly coming from central and eastern Europe. The financial and diplomatic success of the EU has led to its rapid growth across the continent.

The [euro](#) is one of the strongest currencies in the world. The euro is the second-most popular [currency](#) (behind the American dollar) and is used daily by more than 320 million people. Nations that use the euro as a unit of currency are called the “eurozone.”

Leadership of the EU, split among different branches and institutions, is a working model of international cooperation. The EU accepts few candidates: member states must maintain a stable, democratic form of government, a free-market economy, and commitment to the rule of law.

The rapid growth of the European Union, however, has caused a number of administrative and political tensions. Critics believe the process of attaining EU membership is too difficult for Europe’s developing economies. Strict EU regulations place a heavy burden on developing countries to compete with their more developed neighbors.

The global [financial crisis](#), which began around 2008, has caused these tensions to elevate dramatically. The financial crisis is defined by [debt](#) and high [unemployment](#). The European Union created a \$957 billion “rescue package” for the EU economy, primarily for countries that had unsustainable debt rates. These countries included Greece, Ireland, Spain, and Portugal. This rescue package has caused tensions to rise between economically competitive countries and the indebted countries that they are helping to rescue. Indebted countries must now deal with strict [budgets](#) and declining incomes while more financially stable countries are forcing [taxpayers](#) to help fund the financial rescue.

The status of immigrants is also a source of tension and debate in Europe. Historically, Europe has been a center of immigration. The European Union has established the Schengen Area—a zone where Europeans can travel from country to country without having to show their passports. The financial crisis, along with concerns about immigrants’ connections to [terrorism](#) and religious extremism, has caused Europe to develop a more guarded approach to immigration. Some critics argue these attitudes are xenophobic. [Xenophobia](#) is an intense dislike or fear of people from other places or cultures.

Two events demonstrate this debate. In 2005, the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* published 12 cartoons featuring [Islamic](#) subjects. The political cartoons sought to engage in the debate surrounding Muslim extremism. Many Muslim organizations, however, saw the cartoons as [bigoted](#), racist, and insulting. Protests developed across the Muslim world, and demonstrators set fire to Danish embassies in Lebanon, Iran, and Syria. These events had a devastating effect on Denmark’s reputation as a [progressive](#) and welcoming country. The debate surrounding the cartoons also intensified strained relations between the Islamic world and the West.

In 2010, the French government dismantled illegal immigrant camps throughout France. These camps were mostly populated by Roma, also called Gypsies. Roma are a people and culture native to central and eastern Europe. In the face of an economic crisis, EU citizens of poorer member countries, such as the Roma of Bulgaria and Romania, often migrate to more developed EU countries in search of work. Developed countries, however, are also facing economic challenges. These nations do not feel an obligation to accept illegal immigrants, seeing them as both a threat and a burden.

Supporters of the crackdown want to stop illegal immigration. Critics argue the move was racist.

Future Issues

An important predictor of Europe’s political and economic future is its efforts to minimize the effects of [climate change](#).

Europe is often seen as a world leader in environmentally friendly technologies and **legislation**. The 2009 United Nations Climate Change Conference was held in Copenhagen, Denmark. As part of an international agreement signed at the conference, all 27 member states of the European Union agreed to reduce **carbon emissions** by 20 percent by 2020 (from 1990 levels).

The EU also notified the UN of a “conditional offer to increase this cut to 30 percent, provided that other major emitters agree to take on their fair share of a global reduction effort.” This conditional offer illustrates the tension that was present at the conference between developed countries’ high carbon emissions and developing countries’ low or rising carbon use. In fact, many developing nations argued that the Copenhagen Accord was drafted by a small group of powerful countries and unfairly disadvantages poorer countries, many of which are expected to suffer the worst effects of climate change.

The ageing of Europe’s population is also expected to dramatically affect the continent’s social, political, and financial future. The overall population of Europe is set to drop from roughly 590 million to 542 million by 2050. The proportion of people older than 65 will grow from 16 percent to 28 percent. These projected changes will have two major effects: There will be a smaller **work force** to create a dynamic and industrious economy, and governments and citizens will have to care for more elderly people.

These changes will affect different regions of Europe in different ways. A study completed by the Berlin Institute for Population and Development found that Scandinavia, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, western Germany, Switzerland, Slovenia, Austria, and France have the best prospects of supporting **vibrant** and economically successful societies. Many of the most socially and economically powerful elements of these societies will be led by immigrants.

Developing countries, such as those in eastern and southern Europe, are expected to bear the worst of the depopulation trend. Among the struggling economies that may suffer from carbon emission limits are Romania, Bulgaria, and Moldova.

Thus, it seems that Europe’s historic disparities between north and south, west and east, will continue to widen in the future. Enacting regional social policies and economic legislation, especially through bodies like the European Union, may help **curb** that trend.

VOCABULARY

Term	Part of Speech	Definition
appease	<i>verb</i>	to satisfy.
archaic	<i>adjective</i>	old-fashioned or having characteristics of an earlier period.
Berlin Wall	<i>noun</i>	(1961-1989) barrier erected by East Germany that divided the city of Berlin into halves controlled by East Germany and West Germany.
bigoted	<i>adjective</i>	prejudiced or intolerant of a person or group not like oneself.
border	<i>noun</i>	natural or artificial line separating two pieces of land.
boundary	<i>noun</i>	line separating geographical areas.
budget	<i>noun</i>	money, goods, and services set aside for a specific purpose.
carbon emission	<i>noun</i>	carbon compound released into the air through the burning of fossil fuels such as coal or gas.

civic engagement	<i>noun</i>	actions taken by an individual or group to address issues important to a community.
climate change	<i>noun</i>	gradual changes in all the interconnected weather elements on our planet.
communist economy	<i>noun</i>	system where the distribution of goods and services, as well as prices, are largely determined by the government. Also called a managed economy.
continent	<i>noun</i>	one of the seven main land masses on Earth.
curb	<i>verb</i>	to restrain or control.
currency	<i>noun</i>	money or other resource that can be used to buy goods and services.
debt	<i>noun</i>	money, good, or service owed by one person or organization to another.
democracy	<i>noun</i>	system of organization or government where the people decide policies or elect representatives to do so.
devastate	<i>verb</i>	to destroy.
dialect	<i>noun</i>	distinct variation of a language, usually marked by accents and grammar.
diplomacy	<i>noun</i>	art and science of maintaining peaceful relationships between nations, groups, or individuals.
distinguish	<i>verb</i>	to differentiate or recognize as different.
economic	<i>adjective</i>	having to do with money.
electronics	<i>noun</i>	devices or tools that use electricity to work.
endanger	<i>verb</i>	to put at risk.
enhance	<i>verb</i>	to add to or increase in worth.
environment	<i>noun</i>	conditions that surround and influence an organism or community.
euro	<i>noun</i>	unit of currency of the European Union.
European Union	<i>noun</i>	association of European nations promoting free trade, ease of transportation, and cultural and political links.
financial crisis	<i>noun</i>	situation where banks, credit unions, and other institutions suddenly lose much of their value.
flourish	<i>verb</i>	to thrive or be successful.
fluent	<i>adjective</i>	able to speak, write, and understand a language.
free-market economy	<i>noun</i>	system where the distribution of goods and services, as well as prices, are largely determined by supply and demand.
government	<i>noun</i>	system or order of a nation, state, or other political unit.
hereditary	<i>adjective</i>	having to do with inheritance, or the passing of characteristics from parents to offspring.
hide	<i>noun</i>	leather skin of an animal.
Holocaust	<i>noun</i>	(1933-1945) attempted genocide of the Jews of Europe, led by Nazi Germany. Also called the Shoah and the Final Solution.

human geography	<i>noun</i>	the study of the way human communities and systems interact with their environment.
ideological	<i>adjective</i>	having to do with a system of values and beliefs for what is best for a nation or other political unit.
immigrant	<i>noun</i>	person who moves to a new country or region.
imperialism	<i>noun</i>	policy of imposing influence through military force, economic dominance, or diplomacy.
indigenous	<i>adjective</i>	native to or characteristic of a specific place.
infrastructure	<i>noun</i>	structures and facilities necessary for the functioning of a society, such as roads.
Islam	<i>noun</i>	religion based on the words and philosophy of the prophet Mohammed.
Latin	<i>noun</i>	language of ancient Rome and the Roman Empire.
legislation	<i>noun</i>	law, legal act, or statute.
luxury	<i>noun</i>	expensive item.
maritime	<i>adjective</i>	having to do with the ocean.
Middle Ages	<i>noun</i>	(500-1500) period in European history between the Roman Empire and the Renaissance.
minimalist	<i>adjective</i>	style of art that favors simple designs and few decorations or unnecessary additions.
myth	<i>noun</i>	legend or traditional story.
nomadic	<i>adjective</i>	having to do with a way of life lacking permanent settlement.
nuclear arsenal	<i>noun</i>	accumulation of atomic weapons.
peninsula	<i>noun</i>	piece of land jutting into a body of water.
persist	<i>verb</i>	to endure or continue.
phenomena	<i>plural noun</i>	(singular: phenomenon) any observable occurrence or feature.
philosopher	<i>noun</i>	person who studies knowledge and the way people use it.
physical geography	<i>noun</i>	study of the natural features and processes of the Earth.
political geography	<i>noun</i>	study of the spatial relationships that influence government or social policies.
prestige	<i>noun</i>	positive reputation.
progressive	<i>adjective</i>	having to do with political reform and change, usually supporting more government responsibility.
prominent	<i>adjective</i>	important or standing out.
prosper	<i>verb</i>	to be successful.
reduce	<i>verb</i>	to lower or lessen.
refugee	<i>noun</i>	person who flees their home, usually due to natural disaster or political upheaval.
regulation	<i>noun</i>	rule or law.

reign	<i>verb</i>	to rule as a monarch.
resource	<i>noun</i>	available supply of materials, goods, or services. Resources can be natural or human.
revolution	<i>noun</i>	overthrow or total change of government.
Scandinavia	<i>noun</i>	region and name for some countries in Northern Europe: Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Denmark.
Soviet Union	<i>noun</i>	(1922-1991) large northern Eurasian nation that had a communist government. Also called the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, or the USSR.
strategic	<i>adjective</i>	important part of a place or plan.
taxpayer	<i>noun</i>	citizen of a country who pays taxes (fees) to support the government.
tendon	<i>noun</i>	tough tissue that connects muscles to bones. Also called a sinew.
terrorism	<i>noun</i>	use of violence and threats of violence to influence political decisions.
trade	<i>noun</i>	buying, selling, or exchanging of goods and services.
troop	<i>noun</i>	a soldier.
tsunami	<i>noun</i>	ocean waves triggered by an earthquake, volcano, or other movement of the ocean floor.
twine	<i>noun</i>	strong thread made from at least two strings twisted together, often made of plastic.
unemployment	<i>noun</i>	state of not having a job.
vibrant	<i>adjective</i>	lively.
weather	<i>noun</i>	state of the atmosphere, including temperature, atmospheric pressure, wind, humidity, precipitation, and cloudiness.
Western Civilization	<i>noun</i>	civilizations of European origin.
work force	<i>noun</i>	number of people who are employed or available for employment.
xenophobia	<i>noun</i>	intense dislike or fear of people from other places.

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