

Ethnic Minorities in Europe: The Basic Facts

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There is no doubt that Europe is an ethnically diverse continent as a whole, and that there are few, if any countries in which there are no population groups with an ethnic identity distinct from that of the country's titular nation. What is disputed, however, is who counts as (a member of) a minority, where such minorities live, how many of them there are, and how many members they have.

Even though there is no agreed definition of what constitutes an ethnic group, there are a number of features that most academic treatments of the subject attribute to such groups: a proper collective name, shared myths of origin, and cultural characteristics, such as language, religion, traditions and customs that distinguish a given group from others. Different combinations of these features are exhibited by minorities and majorities alike, what makes an ethnic group a minority is a numerically and politically non-dominant position in a state of which they are citizens. Members of ethnic minorities would identify with their group's unique features and, in most circumstances, be recognised by other members of the group. In addition, it is now widely acknowledged that group membership is a matter of individual choice rather than something to be determined by the state. This, however, does not mean that every ethnic minority and everyone who considers himself or herself a member of such a minority is officially recognised as such. Poland, for example, did not recognise the existence of ethnic Germans as a minority in the country before 1989, and both France and Greece still have difficulties accepting that their countries are ethnically, culturally and linguistically diverse. For the most part, however, European countries accept that their societies are multi-ethnic. In some countries, like Hungary, Spain and Belgium, diversity is explicitly recognised and minorities are acknowledged as constituent parts of the nation. Many other countries, too, have committed to the protection of ethnic minorities and have translated into domestic policy the obligations of international treaties securing the rights of ethnic minorities.

As the Figure 1 opposite indicates, the majority of European countries has minority populations below 20% of the total population, but 11 countries have a larger proportion of ethnic minorities. Bosnia and Herzegovina is the only country where no absolute majority exists—Bosniaks as the largest ethnic group make up 44% of the country's total population. At the other end of the spectrum, Ireland, Luxemburg, Malta and Portugal have a virtually ethnically homogenous citizenry.

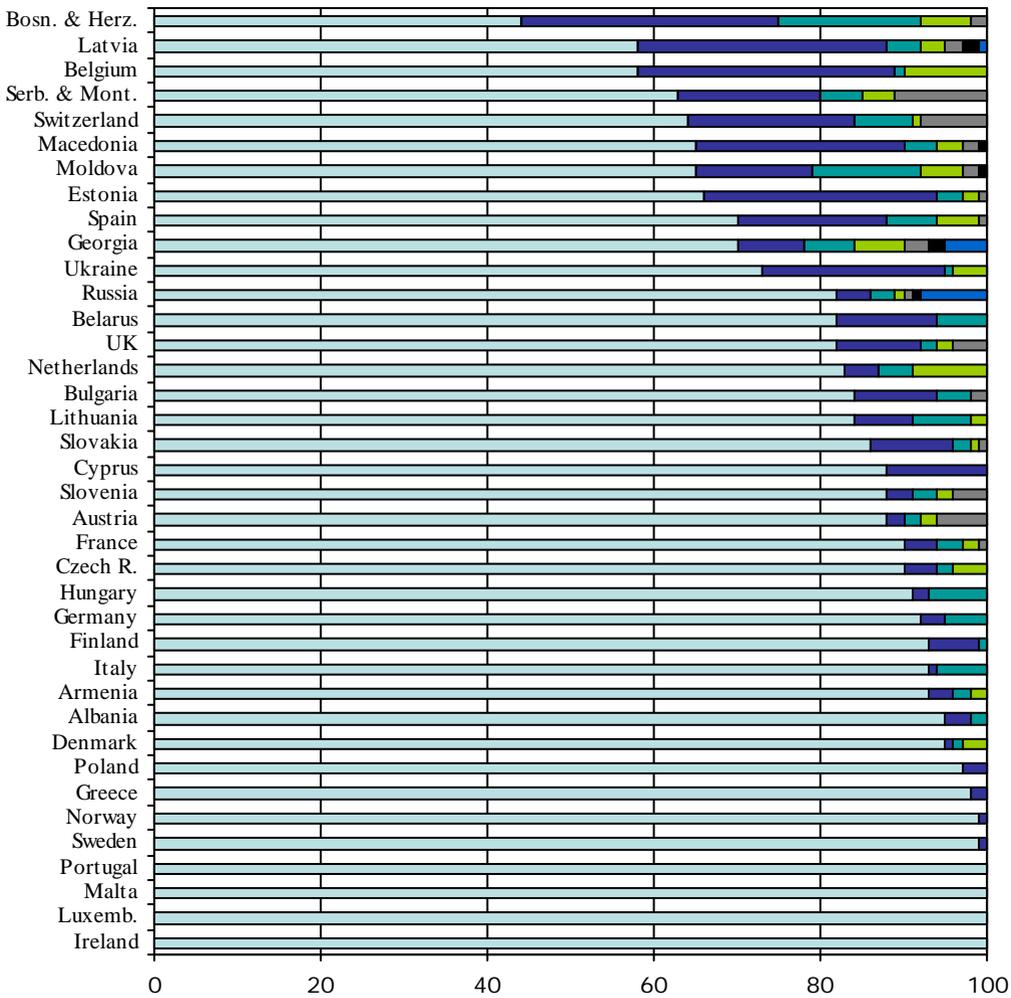


Figure 1: Ethnic Diversity in Europe

The Origins of Europe's Minority Communities

Where do Europe's ethnic minorities come from? In order to answer this question, it is first of all necessary to distinguish between different types of minorities.

National minorities	Ethnic groups who live on the territory of one state (host-state), but are simultaneously ethnic kins of the titular nation of another, often neighbouring, state (kin-state).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Germans in Central and Eastern Europe, South Tyrol, Belgium, Denmark and France • Greeks and Turks in Cyprus • Albanians in Kosovo • Hungarians in Romania and Slovakia • Russians in the CIS
Transnational minorities	Ethnic groups whose homeland stretches across several different states but to do not form the titular nation in any of them.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Frisians of Germany and the Netherlands • Basques and Catalans of Spain and France • Lusatian Sorbs of Germany, Poland and the Czech Republic
Indigenous minorities	Ethnic groups living in their ancestral homelands in only one state of which they are not the titular nation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Corsicans and Bretons of France • Galicians of Spain • Scottish, Cornish and Welsh of Britain
Immigrant minorities	Recent (mostly post-1945) immigrants who often have not been given citizenship.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • North African immigrants in France • Turkish 'guest workers' in Germany

Table 1: Different types of ethnic minorities in contemporary Europe

The origins of three of these types of ethnic minorities can be clarified relatively easily. For immigrant minorities, it is almost self-explanatory, with differences only emerging as to the reason of immigration: post-colonial migration (especially in the cases of North Africans in France and South Asians in the UK), economic opportunity (for example, Turkish, South and Southeast European 'guest workers' in Germany, Austria and Switzerland) and political prosecution. Indigenous minorities, which are small and relatively compactly settled groups, were incorporated into the emerging nation-states of their numerically larger and politically, economically and militarily stronger neighbours and subsequently often subject to significant assimilation pressures. Transnational minorities, in some way, form a bridge between this latter type of ethnic minority and the so-called national minorities which are the largest in number and size in contemporary Europe. Essentially indigenous minorities, transnational ethnic groups have fallen victim to politics of borders and border revisions. Inhabiting a contiguous homeland, they were divided between expanding nation-states either in the process of direct territorial contests, as a consequence of post-war border changes or after the disintegration of multi-national states.

This re-drawing of Europe's political map, primarily after the Balkan Wars in the second decade of the 20th century, after World Wars I and II and in the post-Cold War period with the dissolution of the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia and the collapse of Yugoslavia has been the single most important factor in the 'creation' of ethnic minorities in Europe (see Table 2). However, one also needs to bear in mind that some national minorities, especially ethnic Germans, who do not live in countries neighbouring Germany or Austria, came into existence much earlier as a result of migration (for example, Germans in Russia, Ukraine and Romania). Such groups, as well as some indigenous minorities, were at times also subjected to forced displacement within their host-states, the most notorious examples being the deportations carried out under Stalin in the former Soviet Union.

Pre-1990 National Minorities

Ethnic Hungarians in Romania (almost 2 million), the Slovak Republic (about 600,000), Serbia (Vojvodina – about 400,000) and Ukraine (about 200,000)

Ethnic Germans in Russia and the successor states of the former Soviet Union (about 1.5 million), in different parts of Romania (about 80,000), Poland (about 150,000), Hungary (about 120,000), and the Czech and Slovak Republics (about 50,000)

Ethnic Romanians in Ukraine (460,000) and Hungary (25,000)

Ethnic Albanians in Kosovo (1.8 million), Macedonia (480,000), Southern Serbia (80,000) and Montenegro (50,000)

Turkish Muslims in Bulgaria (800,000), the Sandzak area of Serbia & Montenegro (250,000), and Macedonia (100,000)

Ethnic Poles in Belarus (420,000), Lithuania (260,000), and Ukraine (220,000)

Ethnic Ukrainians in Romania (67,000) and Poland (300,000)

Ethnic Belarusians in Poland (200,000)

Post-1990 National Minorities

Ethnic Russians in the former successor states (25.3 million)

Ethnic Ukrainians (6.8 million) in Russia, Moldova, Belarus, and the Baltic States

Ethnic Belarusians (2.1 million) in Russia, Ukraine, and the Baltic states.

Ethnic Slovaks in the Czech Republic (300,000)

Ethnic Czechs in the Slovak Republic (59,000)

Ethnic Serbs, Croats, and Bosniaks in the successor states of Yugoslavia (about 1 million)

Table 2: The main national minorities in contemporary Europe

Contemporary Ethnopolitics: Conflict vs. Cooperation

The existence of ethnic minorities does not inevitably lead to conflict. Much depends on how politically salient ethnic identities among minority members are, what political agendas they pursue and how majorities respond to minorities' demands. Politically mobilized ethnic groups, have a wide range of resources from which to draw, and decisions on how to use them will depend on the focal points of their ethnic identities, which in turn results in groups developing different political agendas in order to achieve conditions that they deem conducive to the preservation, expression, and development of these identities (see Table 3).

Focus of Identity	Political Agenda	Example
Language, religious status	Preservation of cultural distinctiveness	Alsations in France
National belonging	Secession	Russians in Transdnestria
Ethnic character of homeland, language, religion, customs, and traditions	Gaining sufficient autonomous powers to preserve ethnic character of homeland	German-speakers in South Tyrol
Ethnonational identity	Power-sharing, possibly secession followed by unification with the kin-state	Nationalists in Northern Ireland
	Maintaining integration with the host-state	Unionists in Northern Ireland

Table 3: Focal points of ethnic identity and political agendas

Different political agendas of ethnic minorities give rise to different types of demand. These claims can be either ethnicity related or territory related. Ethnic claims arise in relation to one or more of four closely intertwined areas: self-determination; linguistic, religious, and cultural rights; access to resources/equality of opportunity, and/or material and political aid in support of these other three claims. Ethnic minorities make these claims vis-à-vis their host-state or their host-nation, and/or, where applicable, their kin-state or kin-nation. In the absence of a kin-state willing or able to support an external minority, kin-groups in countries other than the kin-state or other external actors (international organizations, individual states) may be sought out and lobbied to assume this patron role.

Nature of the Ethnic Claim	Addressee of the Ethnic Claim	Example
Self-determination <i>internal</i> <i>external</i>	Host-state	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gagauz in Moldova • Republicans/Nationalists in Northern Ireland
Linguistic, religious, cultural rights	Host-state/Host-nation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Roma across Central and Eastern Europe
Access to resources/equal opportunities	Host-state/Host-nation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alsatians in France
Material/political aid/ support	Kin-state Kin-nation/other kin-group International actors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Russians in Transdnistria • Ethnic Hungarians in Romania and Slovakia • Kosovo Albanians

Table 4: Nature and addressees of ethnic claims

Claims to territory are, similar to ethnic claims, a phenomenon of inter-state relations as well as of inter-ethnic and international relations, and we can distinguish between the nature and the level of the territorial claim (see Table 5).

Nature of the Territorial Claim	Level of the Territorial Claim	Example
irredentist/secessionist	kin-state vs. host-state and minority vs. host-state	Northern Ireland pre-1998
irredentist/non-secessionist/autonomist	kin-state vs. host-state and minority vs. host-state	Alsace in inter-war period
non-irredentist/secessionist	minority vs. host-state	Albanians in Kosovo
non-irredentist/non-secessionist/autonomist	minority vs. host-state	Gagauz in Moldova

Table 5: Nature and level of territorial claims