

Europe in Transition

LESSON 2: POLITICS AND GOVERNMENT UPDATE

Europe is at once a place of both stability and change. The change is apparent mainly through two contemporary trends: the reshaping of Central Europe in the aftermath of communism, and the move to unite European countries in the European Union (EU). This update examines these two developments, as well as the recent resurgence of Europe's far-right movements.

BUILDING CENTRAL EUROPEAN DEMOCRACIES

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As they move from communism to free-market democracy, Central European countries continue to face significant challenges, such as corruption scandals, far-right movements, economic hardship, and environmental degradation. Yet, to a large extent, the efforts of the Central Europeans have paid off. Elections are free and fair throughout the region, and economies have been growing. Because of Central Europe's progress, eight of the ten new members admitted to the EU on May 1, 2004, were from the area: the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia. The other two new members were Cyprus and Malta. In 2007, two more Central European countries, Bulgaria and Romania, were added. The European Union now has twenty-seven members, while Turkey, Croatia, and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia are official candidates to join the EU in the future.

In 1999, NATO began to expand eastward, admitting Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary. NATO had the largest expansion in its history in 2004, when it added Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia. In April 2009, NATO welcomed Albania and Croatia as the newest members of the organization. Macedonia also has been invited to begin negotiations, but only after it resolves the dispute over its name with NATO member Greece. (Greece wants Macedonia to change its name to distinguish it from Greece's northern region of Macedonia.) NATO leaders have also indicated that Georgia and Ukraine could become members in the future.

Of course, the political transitions have played out differently in each country. Here, we take a closer look at two unique cases: the Czech Republic and Slovakia, which were formed after Czechoslovakia split into two separate countries, and East Germany, which reunified with West Germany.

The Czech Republic and Slovakia

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Since the "Velvet Divorce," the two countries have maintained positive relations.

The Czech Republic. In 2003, Vaclav Klaus, the country's first prime minister, was elected to the weaker position of president. He was reelected in 2008 and remains a popular politician in the country. In March 2004, the Czech Republic became a member of the European Union. In January 2007, the Czech parliament narrowly approved a three-party coalition government headed by Mirek Topolánek, who became prime minister and has worked to continue the country's reform program.

Slovakia. Prime Minister Mikulas Dzurinda's government demonstrated its commitment to democracy and economic reform, and, as a result, Slovakia was admitted into NATO and the EU in

2004. However, hardship caused by economic reforms helped turn the voters against Dzurinda in the June 2006 parliamentary elections. Prime Minister Robert Fico of the leftist SMER-Social Democrats formed a government by reaching a coalition agreement with the right-wing Slovak National Party and the populist Movement for a Democratic Slovakia, led by Vladimir Meciar. This coalition has promised to reverse some of the market reform policies of the previous government and to strengthen social welfare measures. In April 2009, Ivan Gasparovic, a former Meciar deputy, was reelected president for a second five-year term.

German Reunification

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German reunification has been successful for the most part. However, the political, social, and economic scars from decades of division are not easily healed. Western Germany has borne the high financial costs of converting East Germany from communism to democratic capitalism through higher taxes on western citizens. Between 1991 and 2004, financial transfers to Germany's eastern states totaled \$1.6 trillion,¹ and another \$250 billion has been earmarked for the 2005-2019 period.² While some areas of the former East Germany, such as Saxony and Brandenburg, have shown significant progress, many other areas continue to face significant economic problems. Unemployment in the east remains around 12 percent.³ Many former eastern citizens, especially young people, have migrated to the west. Right-wing extremism and environmental pollution remain stubborn problems in eastern Germany.

CREATING A STRONG AND EFFECTIVE EUROPEAN UNION

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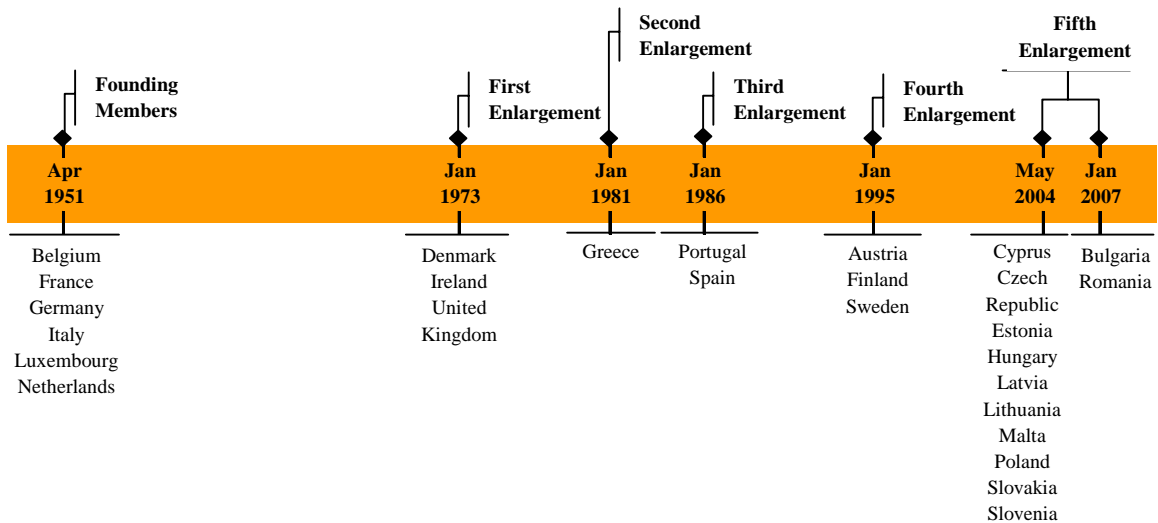
Europeans have made tremendous strides toward integration since World War II. However, merging so many diverse countries into one governing body and economic entity continues to pose significant difficulties. Here we look at three challenges: the enlargement of the EU, economics, and the future shape of the European Union.

EU Enlargement. In 2004, the EU expanded to twenty-five states, and in 2007, the number reached twenty-seven (see Table 1). Union membership is open to any stable democratic European state that has a functioning market economy, a good record on human rights, respect for the rule of law, and the ability to meet EU macroeconomic requirements and fulfill EU laws and regulations. Although these guidelines seem clear, the process of admitting states into the Union can be lengthy, and is often affected by sensitive political issues.

For example, while Turkey started accession negotiations in 2005, its candidacy is controversial. On one hand, Turkey has long been an important member of NATO and has also formed a customs union with the EU, giving the EU and Turkey special trade access to each other's markets. In recent years, Turkey has improved its human rights record, abolishing the death penalty and fighting against torture and mistreatment by law enforcement officials. It has also taken steps to improve minority rights, especially the rights of Turkey's Kurdish population. Nonetheless, Turkey continues to face criticism for its human rights record, especially in the areas of free speech and religion, policing methods, discrimination against women, and lack of protection of minority rights. In addition, a relatively poorer Turkey could prove a drain on EU resources if it is admitted, and concerns have been raised about increased Turkish immigration into other EU countries. Turkey's population is larger than every EU member except Germany. Culture is also an issue, as it is often alleged that European leaders hesitate to admit Turkey because its predominantly Muslim culture

differs too greatly from the rest of Europe. Finally, Turkey’s membership hopes are complicated by the conflict over the island of Cyprus. Turkey has occupied northern Cyprus since 1974. Although in 2005 it agreed to extend its customs union with the EU to the ten new EU members, including the Republic of Cyprus, Turkey made it clear that this step did not imply full diplomatic recognition of the Republic of Cyprus. And so far, Turkey refuses to open its air and sea ports to Greek Cypriot planes and ships.

Table 1
EU Enlargement Timeline



Economic Challenges. In January 2002, twelve EU countries gave up their national currencies in a relatively smooth but complicated exchange for the euro. Three of the then-15 EU members, Denmark, Sweden, and the United Kingdom, took a “wait-and-see” stance towards euro-zone membership. Of the countries that entered the EU in 2004 and 2007, only Cyprus, Malta, Slovakia, and Slovenia have adopted the euro (for a complete list of European Monetary Union countries, see Lesson 2, Activity 3, Teacher Resource 2.6). However, the other new members must adopt the euro once they meet euro-zone requirements. Continued adoption of this currency is a key challenge to European integration.

Another key economic concern is tied to the enlargement of the EU. A phase-in of labor mobility was negotiated into the entrance agreements of the newly entering Central European states. However, many Western Europeans continue to fear that the inclusion of poorer countries will open the floodgates to unwanted immigration and cheap labor, driving up already high unemployment rates. This controversy has fueled resentment between Central and Western Europe.

The Future Shape of the Union. At the year-long “Convention on the Future of Europe,” which began in February 2002, delegates drafted a European constitution, after lengthy negotiations, to replace the complex treaties governing the EU. The leaders of the twenty-five member states signed the constitution in 2004. However, to become official, the constitution had to be approved by each member state by either vote of parliament or public referendum. The failure of a single member state to ratify the document would prevent it from entering into force. In mid-2005, voters in France (55 percent) and the Netherlands (62 percent) rejected the proposed constitution.⁴ This dual

rejection by founding members of the EU sent shockwaves across Europe. In June 2005, EU leaders agreed to a delay in the ratification process in order to evaluate their next steps.

In December 2007, leaders of the EU's 27 member states signed the Lisbon Treaty, which was drawn up to replace the failed European constitution. It came into force in December 2009. The new treaty preserves many of the changes introduced by the previously proposed constitution, such as the creation of an EU foreign minister, a non-rotating president of the European Council, a strengthened role for the European Parliament, and a more efficient voting system. However, unlike the constitution, which was designed to replace all treaties enacted over the last fifty years, the new treaty only amends them.

THE RETURN OF THE FAR RIGHT

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The popularity of the far right has grown in recent years. During the European Parliament elections in 2009, anti-immigrant and far-right groups made significant gains. For instance, in Austria, two anti-immigrant far-Right parties took an unprecedented 17.7 percent of the vote.

In Germany, foreign workers and asylum-seekers are the usual victims of often-brutal far-right attacks. A disproportionately high number of the country's neo-Nazi activities have occurred in eastern Germany, which has significantly higher unemployment than western Germany.

In France, Nicolas Sarkozy's government opened a national debate on "What It Means To Be French" in November 2009. People were invited to share their views on what constitutes being French. The debate sparked thousands of racist and anti-immigrant contributions. Critics accused Mr. Sarkozy of attempting to encourage anti-immigrant sentiment in a bid for to secure the right-wing vote ahead of the next spring's election.

Two factors are keeping far-right parties viable. First, there has been a general toning down of the far right's racist rhetoric in an effort to gain support. Austria's Haider used this strategy in his 2004 victory in Austria's province of Carinthia when he won a second consecutive term as its governor. In April 2005, Haider followed this success by launching a new party, Alliance for Austria's Future, which is based on a more centrist platform, including a ban on racists as members. Haider took this action because opinion polls revealed that support for his Freedom Party had dropped dramatically. After Haider's sudden death in October 2008, Joseph Buchner was elected as the new leader of the Alliance for Austria's Future, which received over 10 percent of the vote in the country's 2008 parliamentary election. Second, violence by ethnic minorities is feeding public fears and helping right-wing groups. One example of this violence occurred in the Netherlands in 2004, when Theo van Gogh, the writer and director of a movie on the treatment of Islamic women, was brutally murdered. On another occasion, in 2008, a young Jewish man was severely beaten in Paris by several people of North African/African origin.

The *Annual Report 2009* by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights shows that in some EU countries, such as Belgium, Denmark, Germany, France, Ireland, Austria, Poland, Slovakia, Finland, Sweden, and the UK, racist crime is on the rise.⁵ Minorities especially affected by the rising violence include illegal immigrants, Jews, Muslims, North Africans, people from the former Yugoslavia, refugees, and Roma. Clearly, the complex social issues leading to right-wing extremism in Europe have not gone away.

Christopher L. Brown, Bozena Radwanska-Zayac, and Audrone Durham
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¹ “Restructuring in Eastern Germany,” *Die Bundesregierung*, (The Press and Information Office of the Federal Government, 2008).

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² Library of Congress, “Country Profile: Germany,” (Library of Congress – Federal Research Division), April 2008
<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/profiles/Germany.pdf> (accessed April 28, 2008).

³ Bundesagentur für Arbeit, “The Labor Market in September 2009,”
<http://www.pub.arbeitsagentur.de/hst/services/statistik/000000/html/start/monat/Arbeitsmarktbericht-engl/2009/0909.pdf> (accessed November 30, 2009).

⁴ “EU Constitution: Where Member States Stand,” *BBC News*, January 26, 2007.

⁵ European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, *Annual Report 2009*,
http://fra.europa.eu/fraWebsite/attachments/FRA-AnnualReport09_en.pdf.