

EUROPE TOPS SURVEY OF MOST LIVABLE COUNTRIES¹

STUDY MEASURES TRENDS IN SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT.

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How well do European nations do in providing for the basic social and material levels of their populations? How do European levels of social provision compare with those of the rest of the world, especially the other economically advanced nations of North America, Asia and the Pacific? Are European social trends subject to significant fluctuations over time, or do they tend to remain stable?

These questions and related ones guided a just-completed study of *Trends in World Social Development*, conducted by the author for the 15-year period ending in 1985. The third report in a series—the first two were published in 1984 as *The Social Progress of Nations* (New York and London: Praeger Publishers)—the current survey again found that European nations lead the world as the countries with the most secure "social safety nets." That is to say, the European nations as a group have been most successful in providing for the basic social and material needs of their populations. The United States ranked 27th in the listing.

The purpose of the study was to provide hard data concerning international progress in closing the gap between the world's richest and poorest nations. Data gathered from the study will be used for purposes of helping to redirect international development assistance resources to those nations and world regions in greatest need of foreign aid.

Drawing on 36 internationally gathered indicators of social progress, patterns of social provision for 124 nations (comprising 98 percent of the world population) were studied for the period 1970-85. The indicators were grouped into 10 categories, focusing on changing national growth patterns with respect to access to basic

education, adequacy of health services, status of women, economic trends, patterns of population growth, factors related to linguistic, religious and ethnic diversity, the protection of internationally guaranteed individual human freedoms, the availability of formal welfare programs and services. Factors also related to the frequency of natural disasters, including the number of fatalities and extent of material losses associated with those disasters, which were also included in the survey.

The survey also took into consideration national patterns of military and defense spending. Expenditures beyond a certain percentage of gross national product (GNP) were treated negatively in the study's ratings of national social progress on the basis that excessive levels of defense spending deprive nations of resources that are needed to finance domestic social programs.

The European commitment to a high level of social development is historical and is a commitment that has set an international standard of social caring for the rest of the world. Today, European models of social development have been emulated by less socially advanced nations.

But levels of social development in Europe are far from uniform. Indeed, many European nations continue to harbor within their borders substantial pockets of poverty, illiteracy, even malnutrition. Some nations are characterized as well by variable access to quality health services and basic education. Others experience serious problems with respect to political participation and, for some, the suppression of internationally guaranteed human rights and freedoms looms large.

In still other European countries, national expenditures for military and defense purposes far exceeds those of the majority

of nations within the region and this results in periodic intraregional political tensions and civil protest campaigns. All of those problems notwithstanding, the socially advanced nations of Northern and Western Europe continue to dominate the list of countries that have achieved the greatest success in providing the most basic social and material needs of their people.

European "Social Leaders"

Of the 124 nations included in this survey, all of the top 12 "social leaders" for the world are located in Europe.

Favorable rates of national and regional economic growth and high levels of political participation, combined with Europe's history of constitutionally protected individual freedoms, have resulted in Northern and Western European countries consistently emerging at or near the top of the list of nations with the "most adequate levels of social provision." Controlled fertility, low rates of infant mortality, high life expectation and literacy patterns also have added to the region's favorable social rating.

Also contributing is the comparative geographic and population smallness of the nations in the region. Europe's relative cultural homogeneity, its socially secured opportunities for the advancement of women and the availability of a well educated pool of skilled workers also help boost Europe's advanced social standing significantly.

Europe's historical commitment to the provision of high-quality, largely tax-supported and nearly universal programs of health, education and welfare services for the aged, disabled, widows, dependent children, unemployed workers and for other groups of socially vulnerable persons accounts for the region's high ratings on each of the three world surveys that have been

conducted since 1970. Denmark, the Federal Republic of Germany, Austria, France, Ireland and Belgium head the list of nations with the most comprehensive system of social welfare programs and services. The United Kingdom, Italy and the Netherlands also have achieved systems of social provision that have been emulated by less socially developed nations.

Europe's "Social Laggards"

Not all European nations share top billing on the list of world social leaders, however. For a variety of economic, political and social reasons, a number of European nations can be characterized as "social laggards," that is, as nations that are "social under-achievers" relative to the resources available to them for advancing social development objectives within their borders. Southern Europe figures prominently on the list of social underachievers relative to Northern and Western Europe; all eight of the Warsaw Pact nations of Eastern Europe are among the bottom 10 of the region's least socially developed countries.

Though many of Europe's "social laggards" still occupy very favorable positions relative to the rest of the world (eight of the "bottom 10" in Europe rank among the top 25 percent of all countries worldwide), by European standards, there still exists considerable room for improvement within these countries.

In the main, the bottom 10 European nations earned less favorable ratings in the survey because of lower rates of economic growth, declines in per-capita food production over earlier levels, lower average per-capita income levels, less advanced levels of educational achievement and serious problems in political participation and internal political instability.

Within the Warsaw Pact nations of Eastern Europe, recurrent economic problems contributed substantially to their lower ratings. The continuing suppression of internationally guaranteed human freedoms that exists within these countries pulled down their ratings as well. These two factors—especially in combination—threaten to undermine the otherwise impressive social gains that East European nations have been able to achieve across a broad spectrum of national life (such as health and welfare services, in patterns of higher education, status of women). They even threaten to disrupt the fragile coexistence that currently prevails among the many ethnic minorities that live in the region. Albania, Yugoslavia, Romania, Poland and Bulgaria performed especially poorly on the survey's political freedoms indicators; economic problems are currently most severe in Yugoslavia, Poland and Albania.

East European spending for defense and military purposes was found to be the highest in all of Europe. In fact, as a percentage of gross national product, East European defense spending is nearly three times that of any other grouping of European nations. This trend is especially troublesome given the potential unrest that could easily spread from Eastern Europe to other subregions of the Continent.

Prospects For The Future

Prospects for even *higher* levels of social development in Europe remain high, although it is true that further developments are not likely to occur at the same rapid pace as they did during earlier decades. Ever so, it is reasonable to expect that European nations, as a group at least, will continue to experience a higher standard of living

than that found in other nations, including that of the economically advanced countries of North America, Asia and Oceania.

But Europe's impressive social gains are not immutable nor are they guaranteed to last into the future. Indeed, many of Europe's most significant social accomplishments are being threatened by region-wide economic problems, by rapid increases in military expenditures in both Western and Eastern Europe and by the widespread suppression of internationally guaranteed human freedoms in Eastern Europe. These trends add immeasurably to the sense of "social insecurity" experienced by many Europeans vis-a-vis the region's future. These trends are indeed ominous and do threaten the very foundations on which current social, political and economic development in Europe rests.

To retain its position of international social leadership, Europe will need to monitor even more closely the complex social, political and economic events that are taking place both within and outside the region. In responding to these myriad events European nations must be prepared to act decisively to neutralize intraregional and international threats to their high level of social provision. Only through carefully considered multinational actions will Europe continue to serve as the standard of excellence against which other nations will assess their social accomplishments.

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