

Europe

AN OVERVIEW

Europe is generally considered to be the westernmost portion of the Eurasian continent, the region to the west of the Ural and Caucasus mountain ranges and to the north of the Mediterranean and Black Seas. It is the second smallest continent, after Australia, covering 3,998,000 square miles (10,355,000 square kilometers). The varied landscape of Europe includes mountains, plains, islands, peninsulas, steppe, and tundra. Europe was once heavily forested, but over the centuries, humans cleared much of the land for habitation and agriculture. This process resulted in the reduction and even extinction of many indigenous animals. Mount El'brus in southwestern Russia is the highest point, at 18,510 feet (5,642 meters), and the lowest point is on the northern shore of the Caspian Sea, at 92 feet (28 meters) below sea level. Europe's climate ranges from the hot, dry regions of the Mediterranean to the wetter and cooler areas of northern Europe and Scandinavia. Because of its close proximity to relatively warm seas, Europe generally enjoys a temperate climate with few extremes. Flooding and earthquakes are the two most prevalent natural threats to the region. Environmental pollution also poses a significant threat, particularly in areas of eastern Europe.

Europe is the third most populous continent and second most densely populated region in the world. It is highly urbanized. Europe's average annual birthrate is the lowest in the world, while its life expectancy is one of the longest. This has led to an aging population and to an increased need for immigrant workers to staff

industry and other sectors of the economy. Europe is home to many diverse cultures and languages. The chief language groups are Germanic, Romance, Slavic, and Finno-Ugric. Many Europeans speak a second language, often English, French, or German. Historically, Christianity has been one of the defining elements of European identity, though significant diversity exists between Roman Catholics, Protestants, and Orthodox Christians. Europe has also been home to a significant Jewish minority, which was decimated during World War II, and scattered Muslim populations in southeastern Europe. The Muslim population is growing, driven by immigration from former European colonies, including North Africa, Indonesia, and the Middle East.

Historically, the great cultural diversity in the narrow confines of the continent has been a source of much discord and conflict, including World War I and World War II. Since 1945, however, Europeans have been trying to deal with their historical and cultural differences through the European Union, which aims for greater political and economic cooperation and integration among the diverse states of Europe.

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