Cultural Diversity and Change in Post-Cold War Europe

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Why are the cultures of European societies different? Are any of these differences increasing or diminishing in the wake of the Cold War? These questions are important with regard to the processes of European integration, but the empirical investigations thus far have been surprisingly scarce. Universalist and diffusion theories assume that with modernization and closer cross-country cooperation, the cultural differences between nations will gradually diminish. Cultural inheritance theories, by contrast, claim that deeply ingrained historical legacies provide resistance to cultural change and may even lead to a culture clash that will push societies further apart. The unprecedented integration of European states into the EU offers a unique opportunity to study the dynamics of cultural change. This dissertation reevaluates and builds upon these theories to provide a revised framework for analyzing cultural change at a societal level. The empirical analyses are based on repeated cross-sectional nationally representative surveys in the World Values Survey and European Values Study series taken from 1990 to 2014.

The first paper, titled “Sources of Societal Value Similarities: Evidence from Dyadic Models” and published in Comparative Sociology, discusses the relationship between various sources of cultural variation and the cultural distances between European countries. Historical legacies are disentangled into multiple factors and compared to economic development, geographic distance, and climate in their explanatory power over cultural distances between countries. Each of these factors is associated with cultural differences and similarities in Europe, and they all overlap and complement one another in their explanatory power to varying degrees. Classifying countries into cultural groups based on single factors is thus reductive and inaccurate. Socio-economic development and historical backgrounds account for approximately equal amounts of between-country variation in cultural distances. This fact suggests that some differences may dissipate under the right conditions, while others are more durable.

The second paper, titled “United in Diversity? The Convergence of Cultural Values among EU Member States and Candidates” and published in European Journal of Political Research, explores the changes within two specific cultural constructs—
emancipative and secular values—between 1992 and 2011, with a focus on European integration. I hypothesize that countries participating in EU integration would converge culturally due to the intentional promotion of certain values by EU actors, an increased level of interaction within the EU, and a convergence in living standards. My analysis confirms that between 1992 and 2011, cultural distances among EU member states decreased; and in the period between 2001 and 2008, most official EU candidates also moved towards Western Europe’s mean cultural position. Meanwhile, since 1992, countries not participating in the EU integration process have diverged culturally from the EU average, even though these countries began as equally distant culturally as potential new members in Central and Eastern Europe in the early 1990s. This pattern remains unchanged, even while controlling for differences and changes in the level of economic development, which suggests that the EU integration process itself may indeed be a force for cultural change.

The third paper, currently under review, more closely explores the cultural polarization between EU members and Eastern European countries that remain outside of the integration process, particularly members of the newly formed Eurasian Economic Union, which encompasses five former Soviet states. I demonstrate that the cultural restructuring of Europe closely coincides with the geopolitical transformation of the continent after the collapse of communism. I argue that this is due to differences in supranational identities, which are based on the predominant religious traditions and imperial legacies, which align European countries in two geopolitically opposed camps, with some countries—most notably Ukraine—showing a divided identity between East and West. In contrast to Catholic and Protestant countries, which cooperate closely in the EU, most Orthodox and Muslim countries (though not all) define their identities in distinct opposition to the strong emancipative values promoted by the EU, and this acts as a shield against the diffusion of values from the West. The empirical analysis demonstrates that changes in emancipative values are influenced most strongly by the accessibility of free media and the level of individual freedoms in a society, including democratic governance. I argue that authoritarian leadership, more common in non-EU countries, uses mass media to promote traditional values in order to legitimize their rule and project soft power into the geopolitical competition with the EU.