Europe has always been a blend of cultures and communities, with a regular churn of people across the continent. Yet the mix can be complex, and some find the changes difficult. While there may be no perfect way to manage Europe’s ethnic and religious diversity, the European Union (EU)-funded research project ACCEPT PLURALISM has developed a guide to help deal with the challenges as they arise.

The project team looked at whether European societies have become more or less tolerant over the past 20 years. It examined the different ways tolerance is defined, as well as how it is applied in norms, institutional arrangements, public policies and social practices. “It is about how countries become culturally diverse; how they remain democratic, peaceful and cohesive; and what is socially acceptable and tolerable,” says ACCEPT PLURALISM’s project coordinator Anna Triandafyllidou, a professor at the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies at the European University Institute in Florence, Italy.

The project’s findings, the events it organised, and the 56-page handbook it produced to deal with potential conflicts can all help improve everyday life in plural communities. “We looked how tolerance is practiced in everyday life and at the workplace,” she adds. “We examined issues like training teachers to be sensitive to the different cultural and religious points of view, and we gave examples of what different solutions might be available when conflicts arise,” comments Triandafyllidou.

The guide, entitled ‘Handbook on Ideas of Tolerance and Cultural Diversity in Europe’, is targeted at schools. It is expected to raise the awareness of teachers, students and local policymakers or civil society actors about the conflicts that ethnic and religious diversity bring and the ways to solve them.
The researchers also produced a Tolerance Indicators Toolkit to score country performances, evaluating the policies and practices to deal with cultural, religious and ethnic diversity challenges – thus providing a way to compare EU member states. The results are expected to help policymakers, local and regional authorities, NGOs, media and schools.

Furthermore, the project team looked at the meanings of tolerance in a variety of contexts. The researchers not only reviewed past empirical research and scholarly theoretical literature, but they also conducted original research in 15 countries. The results revealed the complexity of the issue. “It is not always clear what is or is not tolerable in any given context,” explains Triandafyllidou. “The different histories of different groups and countries lead to multiple understandings about what is acceptable”, she adds.

The project was particularly focused on rising tensions with marginalised Muslim communities. “There is an increasing intolerance, in particularly towards Muslims. There is a view that liberal societies need protection against religions, particularly Muslims,” says Triandafyllidou. In addition to Muslims, the project looked at two other minority groups: the Roma and blacks. Triandafyllidou notes that “while each of these groups is very diverse, they all felt stigmatized.”

The project team found, for example, that the communities that protested the loudest about immigration were sometimes those with the fewest immigrants. Indeed, there is even a rising fear of immigration in parts of Eastern Europe where there is a net migration loss. “This counters the thesis that there is a threshold on how much immigration a community can have,” says Triandafyllidou. “The issue, for many people, is more about the religious or cultural traditions, and we found that if a community is ethnically more homogenous, then it is harder to accept newcomers,” she concludes.

See also:
CORDIS [2]

Project:
Tolerance, Pluralism and Social Cohesion. Responding to the challenges of the 21st century in Europe

Project Acronym:
ACCEPT PLURALISM


Links