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## Once upon a time there was a country called Europe

By Dimitris Ballas, Danny Dorling and Benjamin Hennig, authors of [The Social Atlas of Europe](#)

*‘We cannot aim at anything less than the Union of Europe as a whole, and we look forward with confidence to the day when that Union will be achieved’*

It may sound inconceivable today that a statement such as the above could be made by a British Prime Minister and even more so by the leader of the Conservative Party. Yet, this is an extract from a speech delivered by Winston Churchill at the Congress of Europe in The Hague on 7 May 1948. It is just an example of [numerous similar statements and activities supporting European integration and union](#). These were part of wider efforts and actions by the people of a continent shattered by war towards a common purpose and future, imaginatively ‘narrated’ by a member of Europe’s next generation in an [award-winning video](#). These efforts have been steadily leading towards a Europe [United in Diversity](#) and to the formation of a European identity underpinned by common values and ideals such as the establishment of democratic institutions, the respect of human rights and the protection of minorities, as well as solidarity and social cohesion.

However, Europe has now reached a critical crossroads after several years of a severe economic crisis and austerity measures that have [disproportionately and brutally hit the most disadvantaged](#). There has also been an apparent revival of old nationalisms and divisions coupled with the rise of [extremist far right and populist parties](#). The performance of such parties in last month’s European parliament elections has highlighted the need for reform and change. But there are very different perspectives taken with regards to what the response to the rise of Eurosceptic parties should be. On the one hand, there are [Eurosceptic calls](#) for a stop or even a reversal of the plans for further integration and political union. In contrast, there are also strong voices of support for changes that are [“needed to keep the European dream alive”](#), [shifting the focus from austerity towards supporting “investment on jobs and on growth”](#) and for a [new radical manifesto for Europe calling for “less Europe on issues where member countries do very well on their own, and more Europe when union is essential”](#).

Our book [The Social Atlas of Europe](#) aims to offer a new human geography and human cartography perspective and contribution to debates about the above issues by bringing together a great many maps and facts about Europe and its people. Our approach is underpinned by the view that Europe is something much more than just a world region and a collection of nation states and by the idea that we are hopefully moving more towards the belief that so many of us are a “European people” instead of a “Europe of nations”. We argue

that the EU needs to be thought of as an entity that is more than just a union of member states, more than just a common market or just a potential monetary or fiscal union. What does it mean to be European today? To what extent do the citizens of EU member states feel that they are citizens of something larger than their own country?

One way of moving towards a “European people” instead of a “nation-state” mentality and of bolstering European identity further is to think of Europe and its economy, culture, history and human and physical geography in terms of a single large land mass. This is already happening to some extent, especially in the minds of the rapidly increasing numbers of Europeans who live in a member state other than their country of birth perceiving Europe and its people in a more fluid way. An example of this is the story of a [7-year old boy from Valencia in another award-winning video](#).

[The Social Atlas of Europe](#) aims at highlighting the notion of Europe in these terms by looking at its physical and population geography simultaneously utilising the latest available demographic, social, and economic data on a wide range of topics including social values, culture, education, employment, environmental footprints, health and well-being, and social inequalities and cohesion and with the use of state-of-the-art geographical information systems and new cartography techniques. The Social Atlas visualises and maps Europe in a way that makes it more likely for Europeans to make more sense of both their local area’s physical and human geography and to think of Europe as one place: the place they belong to or their “home” (which is perhaps the way in which [the next generation of Europeans](#) will think when asked ‘where do you come from?’).

As three European geographers whose first languages are Greek, English and German respectively, we hope that [The Social Atlas of Europe](#) can be used to enhance the perception of European identity and solidarity. The Atlas, which includes all countries that have shown a clear and strong commitment to a common European future, not only shows how different are the separate countries, regions and great cities of this continent, but also how often they are so similar. There are a huge number of ways in which people living in different parts of Europe have so much in common. Often the real differences are not found across national borders but between villages and cities or between rich and poor quarters of a town. And the rich quarters of Europe are all more similar to each other than to the poorer areas that are nearer to them. Looking at the maps in this atlas you can begin to believe that you are looking at the geography of a single large group of people. You can see what happens to all the people of Europe collectively and have a better grasp of their collective hopes, fears and lives.

Overall, [The Social Atlas of Europe](#) aims to offer a fresh perspective and a new way of thinking about Europe as a continent of cities rather than states, a continent of people rather than power and one of hope rather than decline, reminding its people how much they have in common and highlighting that there is now, more than ever, a need to carry on working together rather than pulling apart.