



AP Photo/MTI/Sandor H. Szabo

Hungarian border guards offer tea to a group of undocumented immigrants from Bangladesh. This group was captured with three Hungarian smugglers who illegally transport immigrants into Western Europe.

Europe—organizations and experts use different measures, such as geographic boundaries or cultural, political or economic similarities. Most definitions include Belarus, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Moldova, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Ukraine and parts of Russia.¹ Some also include Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, the Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, Slovenia and Yugoslavia.

Historically, the borders of these countries have changed many times. Struggles over access to rivers, oceans and natural resources have reshaped national boundaries. Political strife, too—particularly, the World Wars and Cold War—also resulted in redrawn boundaries. Consequently, most of us have relearned the European map several times over.

Because of these redrawn boundaries, some of the nations as they are defined today include people whose identity is tied to residents in other nations in the region. Judit Juhász, a counselor at the Hungarian Central Statistical Office in Budapest, illustrates the experiences of many Europeans with an often-told story:

Uncle Cohen is speaking about his life: “I was born under the monarchy, I went to school in Czechoslovakia, I got married in Hungary, worked in the Soviet Union, and I am a Ukrainian citizen.” One listener remarks, “You are a much-traveled person.” “Not at all,” Uncle Cohen answers. “I never left my hometown.”²

Ethnicity and national identity do not always go hand in hand, so it’s difficult to talk about one country without mentioning several other countries and ethnic groups. Many Eastern European countries have a long history of migration and shifting borders. And like the United

Shifting Borders

Immigration in Eastern Europe

BY LOUISE DAVIDSON

At the Business Meeting of the 2006 Churchwide Gathering of Presbyterian Women, voting representatives challenged Presbyterian Women to study immigration issues and to make immigration its focus for justice and peace work in the 2006–2009 triennium. Since that time, Presbyterian Women has explored immigration in various settings and in a variety of ways.

Throughout 2007 and 2008, the Churchwide Coordinating Team of Presbyterian Women (CCT/PW) studied denominational resources and policies on the impact of

immigration on the United States. PW’s first U.S.A. Mission Experience, which is the focus of this issue of *Horizons*, helped PW learn about immigration and border issues. This September, the Global Exchange continues PW’s focus on immigration. Twenty-seven women are traveling to Eastern Europe to visit the Czech Republic, Hungary and Ukraine to learn how immigration affects these countries.

A History of Border Changes

There is no standard definition for which countries are part of Eastern

States, many of these countries are struggling with the complex issues of immigration.

For example, in 1920, as a result of borders redrawn at the end of World War I, approximately five million ethnic Hungarians became residents of Ukraine, Romania and other neighboring countries.³ As recently as 2004, the issue of offering Hungarian citizenship to these displaced people was still being debated. Many other countries have similar issues—the 1993 dissolution of Czechoslovakia and the 2003 dissolution of Yugoslavia created countries in which increased numbers of people in ethnic minorities were separated by new borders from people who shared their ethnic identity.

The Soviet Era

According to the Migration Policy Institute, the goal to create “one Soviet people” led to forced migration during the Soviet era. National minorities in Ukraine were deported during the 1930s and 1940s, and in the Soviet era, ethnic Ukrainians were moved to Siberia, Russia and Kazakhstan.

Following the end of the Cold War in 1989, Eastern European nations opened their borders. During the early 1990s, migration to and from former Soviet Bloc countries included repatriated ethnic people and refugees from armed conflicts.

Later in the decade, economic stresses developed as countries struggled to recover from the communist political system. This led to waves of labor emigration as undocumented people headed west, hoping to find employment opportunities.

DuSan Drbohlav, professor of science at Charles University, Prague, writes that some people migrated seeking asylum from persecution due to race, nationality, religion and political viewpoints.⁴ Among them

were thousands of Czech Roma who applied for asylum in Canada and the United Kingdom.

The Current Reality

All the countries that the 2008 Global Exchange is visiting have enacted increasingly complex laws to deal with immigration, mainly at the request of the European Union. Visa processes have been strengthened, except within the EU and certain other western countries where they are not required.

In many Eastern European countries, lenient labor laws have enabled immigrants to become long-term undocumented workers. Thousands of undocumented people have been stopped at the western borders of Hungary, Ukraine and the Czech Republic. In spite of efforts to control immigration, however, Eastern European countries have become transit countries for migrating peoples from places even further east, among them Bulgaria, China, India, Pakistan and Afghanistan.⁵ Increased efforts to reduce this migration have not controlled it, but rather have increased the numbers of undocumented immigrants.

As in the United States, the debate has raged in EU countries as to whether undocumented immigrants contribute more to social services than they use. Since many are young, the hope is that they will pay more into social services systems than they take out. However, there may be greater costs for education as they settle and have families.

Juhász notes that, in some European countries, pensioners are beginning to outnumber those contributing to social security funds, thus creating concerns about the long-term ability of societies to support older adults. As a result, some western countries have freely granted work permits to people from other EU countries.

Human trafficking, the worst type of illegal, often forced, migration, has become a significant concern. While

reliable statistics are not available, it is known that in Hungary, women are recruited for prostitution and trafficked to other countries, and women from other countries are trafficked into Hungary.⁶

Many of the concerns growing out of immigration in Eastern Europe are similar to concerns in the United States. Most countries are willing to receive highly-skilled immigrants. But what about those with few skills? Will they take jobs from native workers and depress wages? How will newcomers affect the common values of a nation? How can receiving countries combat discrimination and racism? What are the implications for the social services systems? Finding answers to these and other questions will continue to challenge us all as people migrate to try to improve their lives and those of their families. 🍀

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Notes

1. United Nations Statistics Division, Standard Country and Area Codes Classification, <http://unstats.un.org/unsd/methods/m49/m49regin.htm#europe>.
2. “Hungary: Transit Country Between East and West,” Migration Policy Institute, 2003. For more information, visit www.migrationinformation.org/profiles.
3. “Country Profile: Hungary,” British Broadcasting Company, *BBC News* web site, March 2008. For more statistics, visit http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/country_profiles.
4. DuSan Drbohlav, “The Czech Republic: From Liberal Policy to EU Membership,” Migration Policy Institute, 2005.
5. Olena Malynovska, “Caught Between East and West, Ukraine Struggles with Its Migration Policy,” Migration Policy Institute, 2006.
6. “Trafficking in Persons Report,” U.S. Department of State, 2008, 137–138.