



## Immigration & Integration in the EU-Mediterranean Relationship: How Mediterranean Policy Impacts Religion in the EU

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# Immigration & Integration in the EU-Mediterranean Relationship:

How Mediterranean Policy Impacts Religion in the EU

Natalie Dolenga

## Abstract

This paper examines the intersection of immigration, integration, and religion within the EU-Mediterranean framework, aiming to understand how migration from the southern Mediterranean region to Europe interacts with integrative policies and religious landscapes. The first section provides a background on the EU-Mediterranean relationship, detailing the refugee “crisis” of 2015 and the evolution of the current policy framework. The analysis then progresses through four case studies of key EU Member States—France, Spain, Italy, and Greece—that significantly shape broader EU policies. These case studies assess the effectiveness and limitations of each approach to managing immigration, facilitating integration, and addressing religious diversity. Ultimately, this paper highlights the notable successes and critical shortcomings in these countries’ policy frameworks, emphasizing the importance of enhanced interfaith dialogue and more inclusive policymaking to effectively integrate Muslim populations from south of the Mediterranean and manage immigration on a large scale.

**Keywords:** *European Union, Mediterranean, immigration, integration, religion, coexistence.*

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# 1. Introduction

**O**ver the years, the *European Union* (EU) has developed multifaceted strategies to address and collaborate with its partners on the southern border of the Mediterranean Sea. Central to these efforts are their responses to immigration and security challenges, which have emerged as pivotal issues informing EU-Mediterranean policy and discourse among and within the EU Member States.

Immigration surges in recent decades and subsequent demographic shifts have increased interfaith communication and coexistence among families of diverse religious backgrounds as they settle long-term in the EU. Though many countries and the EU act as largely secular entities, Member States and the EU must contend with the complexities of cross-cultural coexistence, immigration, and integration..

While matters of religious affairs technically fall under the shared competence between the EU and its Member States, they are predominantly managed at the national level based on the country's histories, interests, and approaches to secularism. This decentralized governance framework grants the Member States considerable autonomy in shaping secularism policies, religion's role in public life, addressing religious discrimination, and interfaith dialogue. Consequently, diverse attitudes and approaches to religion exist across the EU.

This paper examines the intersection of EU-Mediterranean policy, both at the supranational and national levels, with immigration, integration, and religion. It seeks to understand not only the formal religious policies of the EU and its Member States but also the attitudes of both EU citizens and immigrants toward navigating an increasingly religiously diverse environment. By examining these dynamics, this paper explores how policy frameworks, particularly that of the EU-Mediterranean relationship, and societal attitudes intersect in shaping religious coexistence and integration in contemporary Europe.

**“While matters of *religious affairs* technically fall under the shared competence between the EU and its Member States, they are predominantly managed at the national level based on the country's *histories, interests, and approaches to secularism.*”**

## 2. Background

### 2.1 EU-Mediterranean policy

EU-Mediterranean policy first gained traction in the 1960s, when the EEC (the *European Economic Community*; predecessor to the EC and EU) concluded several trade agreements with southern Mediterranean countries such as Egypt, Lebanon, Morocco, and Tunisia. While these agreements established the beginning of a trade and economic network within the region, they did not share a common vision or policy regarding the EEC's place in the Mediterranean.

In 1972, the EC (*European Community*; successor to the EEC and predecessor to the EU) developed the *Global Mediterranean Policy*, which addressed the Mediterranean countries "in a single policy framework"<sup>1</sup> for the first time to link themselves to the Middle East/North African regions, along with their supplies of oil and raw materials crucial for EU energy security. However, this single framework was arguably mistakenly based on a single perception of the entire region: the EU conceptualized it as "a political area that was homogenous enough to justify addressing all parts in the same way,"<sup>2</sup> skewing judgments of individual countries and thereby rendering the practical construction and implementation of policy complicated.

In 1995, the EU launched the *Barcelona Process*, marking a turning point in EU-Mediterranean policy that laid the foundation for a more structured and comprehensive approach to their relationship. The *Barcelona Euro-Mediterranean Conference* established three main pillars for progress: political and security; economic and financial, which focused on a shared free-trade area; and social, cultural, and human, which aimed to promote intercultural understanding.

**“While [*European Economic Community*] agreements established the beginning of a *trade and economic network* within the region, they did not share a *common vision or policy* regarding the EEC's place in the Mediterranean.”**

<sup>1</sup> Maria Eleanora Guasaconi, "Europe and the Mediterranean in the 1970s," *Les Cahiers de l'IREC*, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Federica Bicchi, "'Lost in transition:' EU Foreign Policy and the European Neighborhood Policy Post-Arab Spring," *L'Europe en formation*, 2014.

Ultimately, the *Barcelona Process* aimed to integrate the northern single European market and the Mediterranean market, as well as combat security risks from Northern Africa, such as irregular immigration, drug trafficking, and terrorism.<sup>3</sup> Its social dimension was also pivotal for its focus on deepening mutual understanding and cooperation between people on both sides of the Mediterranean. This pillar highlighted educational and cultural exchanges, support for civil society organizations, and human rights initiatives to support democratic reforms. The *Barcelona Process* significantly departed from earlier ad-hoc approaches by establishing a structured foundation for long-term cooperation between the EU and southern Mediterranean countries. With a comprehensive framework addressing political, economic, social, and cultural components, the *Barcelona Process* aimed to build an increasingly connected Euro-Mediterranean region capable of addressing shared challenges.

In 2004, the EU launched the *European Neighborhood Policy* (ENP), encompassing countries that share land or maritime borders with the EU, including Southern Mediterranean and Eastern European countries. Inspired by the principles of the *Barcelona Process*, this policy framework emphasized bilateral as opposed to regional dialogue, finally recognizing the individuality of Southern Mediterranean countries. This allowed for a more accurate understanding of each country's sociopolitical situation and greater alignment regarding the kind of relationship they wanted with the EU. Policy priorities reflected the *Barcelona Process'* three pillars, highlighting political cooperation, economic development focused on stabilization and integration, and societal and cultural connections.

Building upon the *Barcelona Process* and the ENP, the *Union for the Mediterranean* (UfM) was launched in 2008 as its institution to focus on enhancing and strengthening the EU-Mediterranean relationship. Serving as a singular intergovernmental organization, the UfM brings together the 27 EU Member States with their southern Mediterranean partners under a co-presidency currently held by the EU and Jordan. The main objectives of the UfM are to promote peace and stability, foster economic development, and collaboratively handle issues such as migration and energy security. The UfM acts as a concrete institution focused on fostering deeper integration and understanding of EU-Mediterranean affairs, reflecting the EU's commitment to a more productive and synergistic relationship with its neighbors south of the Mediterranean.

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<sup>3</sup> José M. Magone, "Spanish foreign policy within the European Union," *Spanish Contemporary Politics*, 2004.

**“The UfM [*Union for the Mediterranean*] acts as a concrete institution focused on *fostering deeper integration and understanding* of EU-Mediterranean affairs, reflecting the EU’s commitment to a *more productive and synergistic relationship* with its neighbors south of the Mediterranean.”**

The EU-Mediterranean policy was also strongly influenced by the Arab Spring, a series of anti-government uprisings and protests across the Middle Eastern/North African regions, including but not limited to Southern Mediterranean countries like Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Libya, Lebanon, Morocco, Syria, and Tunisia. From late 2010 to 2012, these countries faced massive movements against government corruption that limited social mobility, economic opportunity, and personal freedoms. While several leaders were forced from power, only Tunisia experienced lasting democracy. On the other hand, Libya and Syria both fell into devastating civil wars that produced millions of refugees fleeing persecution, crippling economic conditions, and armed conflict. While many refugees relocated to neighboring countries like Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey, many also crossed, or attempted to cross, the Mediterranean Sea into EU countries like Greece, Italy, and Malta. This prompted a need for revised EU-Mediterranean policy and elevated the conversation on third-country migration into the EU.

The EU first responded to the Arab Spring via a proposal by the *European Commission* on March 8, 2011, emphasizing bilateralism as described in the ENP, along with a “more for more” approach that promised benefits for the Arab Spring countries under the condition that they were making democratic progress. These benefits revolved around money, mobility, and market access. For example, the EU used to fund increases, mobility partnerships to ease legal migration, or greater market access and regulatory convergence as incentives. Support from the EU was conditional on the country’s democratization. Their subsequent response on May 25, 2011, articulated the goal of building “deep democracy,”<sup>4</sup> encompassing democratic principles such as free speech, an independent judiciary, and a robust civil society. The EU reaffirmed its commitment to bilateral cooperation, supporting each country based on their “individual needs and priorities”<sup>5</sup> and ensuring sustainable economic growth to support democratic transition.

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<sup>4</sup> European Commission, “The EU’s Response to the Arab Spring,”2011.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.



Additional programs, such as the *SPRING* (Support for Partnership, Reforms, and Inclusive Growth) Programme in September 2011, allocated funds to countries directly experiencing uprisings and therefore deemed in greater need of economic development. However, there was little new information or policy in these communications; the EU's main tools remained trade and limited financial aid, coupled with conditionality based on democratic progression.

As Europe's geographical proximity to and economic linkages with the affected countries made them vulnerable to spillover effects from the Arab Spring, immigration rose as one of, if not the most, pressing concern for EU policymakers and citizens. Conflicts in the Southern Mediterranean region have displaced millions, forcing them out of their home countries into neighboring ones and sometimes, eventually, across the Mediterranean. These migrants often belong to different cultural backgrounds, bringing with them to Europe different religions and attitudes regarding the place of religion in public life.

**“As Europe’s *geographical proximity* to and *economic linkages* with the affected countries made them vulnerable to spillover effects from the Arab Spring, *immigration* rose as one of, if not the most, *pressing concern* for EU policymakers and citizens.”**

Presently, the EU-Mediterranean relationship and policy are managed primarily by a few institutions. The European Commission, the EU's executive arm, proposes legislation and implements decisions passed by the legislative branch (the *European Parliament* and the *Council of the EU*). Its efforts regarding immigration are supported by the *European External Action Service* (EEAS), which serves as the diplomatic service of the EU and works under the High Representative for the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security, a dual-hatted role with the Vice-President of the European Commission. The EEAS manages the EU's *Common Foreign and Security Policy* (CFSP) and international relations, working to make the EU's foreign policy framework more efficient and promote peace and security. Furthermore, the Union for the Mediterranean also serves as a platform for fostering dialogue and cooperation between the regions, mainly thanks to its co-presidency with the EU, which permanently occupies one of those positions.

The *Pact on Migration and Asylum*, proposed by the *European Commission* and passed by both legislative entities in the EU in the Spring of 2024, is the most recent EU communication on immigration, asylum, and integration. Its efforts concentrate on four pillars: securing external borders, making asylum procedures more efficient, developing a more effective solidarity framework, and embedding migration in international partnerships, especially relevant to the EU-Mediterranean relationship. The Commission also advanced or concluded negotiations for global partnerships with southern Mediterranean countries like Egypt and Tunisia. The *Pact on Migration and Asylum* reinforces EU goals of quickening the asylum process, increasing solidarity among EU Member States, and deterring irregular immigration, particularly by strengthening international relationships and border capacities.<sup>6</sup> While the Pact purports to maintain fundamental human rights and make the journeys of migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees, various humanitarian organizations have criticized the reforms because they will do the opposite. Amnesty International stated that they would “set European asylum law back for decades to come and lead to greater human suffering,”<sup>7</sup> a sentiment echoed by *Human Rights Watch* and the *Red Cross*. They argue that the *Pact* reduces protections and access to asylum, subjects more people to detention centers at EU borders, and allows Member States to replace relocation efforts with border-strengthening efforts such as “border fences, barbed wire, and surveillance.”<sup>8</sup>

Amnesty International also notes that the solidarity framework fails to adequately support Member States like Italy, Greece, and Spain, where more immigrants first arrive in Europe. The three organizations emphasize that the *Pact* shifts greater responsibility to countries external to the EU, such as Libya and Tunisia. Overall, the *Pact* neglects to alleviate pressure from states that border the Mediterranean Sea to the north and south, exacerbating current conditions and making immigration management more difficult in the EU-Mediterranean context.

**“...the *Pact* neglects to *alleviate pressure* from states that border the Mediterranean Sea to the north and south, exacerbating current conditions and making *immigration management* more difficult in the *EU-Mediterranean context*.”**

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<sup>6</sup> European Commission, “Pact on Migration and Asylum,” 2024.

<sup>7</sup> Amnesty International, “EU Migration Pact Agreement Will Lead to a Surge in Suffering,” 2023.

<sup>8</sup> Judith Sunderland. “EU’s Migration Pact is a Disaster for Migrants and Asylum Seekers.” *Human Rights Watch*, 2023.

However, despite the increased focus on EU-Mediterranean relations in recent decades, the EU has been criticized for its lack of coherence and maintenance of values when dealing with Mediterranean countries: “Very often, commercial or strategic interest [has] eclipsed European values.”<sup>9</sup> This is reflected clearly in the interactions between some EU Member States and southern Mediterranean autocrats with subpar human rights records. For example, France awarded their highest state honor, the Legion d’Honneur, to Egyptian autocrat and President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi despite his “brutal repression of political opposition, Islamists, and liberals.”<sup>10</sup> It has also been argued that Europe’s approach of border externalization, or transferring greater responsibility to southern Mediterranean states, as the new *Pact on Migration and Asylum* will do, “diminishes the EU’s reputation as a values-based power.”<sup>11</sup> Externalization hands over power to autocrats or warlords in states such as Libya and Tunisia, failing to make a difference and protect human rights in the name of strategic deterrence.

In summary, the evolution of EU-Mediterranean policy has been marked by significant transformations and challenges over the decades. From early trade agreements in the 1960s to developed initiatives like the *Barcelona Process* and the *Union for the Mediterranean* to newer entities and policies to manage growing situations, the EU seeks to foster a strong partnership along political, social, and economic dimensions with southern Mediterranean countries. The Arab Spring and its aftermath revealed the vulnerabilities and complexities of this relationship, highlighting the issues of security and migration that the EU continues to reckon with today. The EU responded with initiatives promoting democratization, economic development, and regional stability. However, criticisms have persisted regarding the EU’s prioritization of strategic or economic interests over steadfast adherence to “European values.”

**“From early trade agreements in the 1960s to developed initiatives...to newer entities and policies to manage growing situations, the EU seeks to foster a *strong partnership* along *political, social, and economic* dimensions with southern Mediterranean countries.”**

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<sup>9</sup> Bichara Khader, “Muslims in Europe or European Muslims? The Construction of a Problem,” *Rivista Di Studi Politici Internazionali*, 2016.

<sup>10</sup> Anchal Vohra, “The Arab Spring Changed Everything—in Europe,” *Foreign Policy*, 2020.

<sup>11</sup> Lorena Stella Martini and Tarek Megerisi, “Road to Nowhere: Why Europe’s Border Externalisation is a Dead End,” *European Council on Foreign Relations*, 2023.

The recent *Pact on Migration and Asylum* and consequent discourse exemplify tensions within EU-Mediterranean policy. In attempting to address solidarity between EU Member States, asylum processes, and border management externalization, the *Pact* raised concerns regarding human rights violations and the treatment of migrants, prompting scrutiny from international humanitarian organizations and civil society. This reflects the ongoing challenges in the EU-Mediterranean framework, which has long sought to balance the pursuit of security and stability with human rights and democratic principles. The EU faces the challenge of navigating these complexities while upholding its values and fostering a more equitable, balanced partnership with its southern Mediterranean neighbors. Managing immigration across the Mediterranean Sea remains a pivotal issue, requiring an approach that respects each region's interests and international legal obligations. Ultimately, the future of EU-Mediterranean relations hinges on the EU's ability to reconcile its strategic objectives with its foundational values and its subsequent ability to nurture a balanced and collaborative relationship with the southern Mediterranean region, particularly when facing complex cross-border challenges like immigration and integration.

## 2.2 Immigration in the EU

### 2.2.1 The Refugee “Crisis” of 2015

2015 was a pivotal year in immigration history, often referred to by international actors as “the year of Europe’s refugee crisis”<sup>12</sup> due to the sheer number of refugees and migrants attempting to cross into Europe and the numerous tragedies that were unspelled in the process. Over 1.3 million people sought asylum in Europe, largely a consequence of conflicts in North Africa and the Middle East, particularly the Syrian civil war.<sup>13</sup> This immigration surge reshaped migration patterns, initially shifting away from the perilous Libya-Italy cross-Mediterranean route towards the relatively safer Turkey-Balkan land route, only to see a resurgence of crossings via the Mediterranean halfway through the year due to its being relatively shorter and cheaper. Overall, the “refugee crisis” of 2015 brought increased attention to the EU-Mediterranean relationship and its command of immigration policy, sparking discourse and highlighting the question of immigration and integration in the EU.

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<sup>12</sup> “2015: The year of Europe’s refugee crisis,” *United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees*.

<sup>13</sup> “Number of Refugees to Europe Surges to Record 1.3 Million in 2015.” *Pew Research Center*, 2016.

Responses to the immigration influx in 2015 highlighted the relevance of the EU and its Member States' shared competence, or responsibility, over immigration matters. Because action can legally be taken on both supranational and national levels, approaches to the immigration crisis differed among institutional levels and countries. For instance, the *European Commission* initially proposed the ten-point European Agenda on Migration in May of 2015, outlining their plan for the 'crisis' wherein Member States "committed to taking rapid action to save lives and to step up EU action"<sup>14</sup> by focusing on immediate action, financial support, resettlement plans, assuring implementation of the *Common European Asylum System*, and more.

However, Member States also responded with individual political action, adopting varying policies on who could enter their borders and under what circumstances, citizenship and nationalization laws, and burden-sharing across and outside the *European Union*. Germany's then-Chancellor, Angela Merkel, adopted an open-door policy known as "Willkommenskultur," which welcomed hundreds of thousands of refugees and demonstrated a robust humanitarian response but also strained resources and provoked intense domestic political debate and polarization regarding security and immigration.

In contrast, some countries hardened legislation and restricted refugee rights: Hungary, for example, constructed fences along their borders with Serbia and Croatia and refused to accommodate the EU's original September 2015 proposal of allowing refugee relocation within Hungary. Austria, Macedonia, and Slovenia followed suit, building fences to prevent refugees from crossing their borders.<sup>15</sup> Member States are afforded significant liberty in deciding who can enter as refugees, asylum-seekers, or immigrants, stay, and gain citizenship. The influx of refugees and discourse regarding institutional responses quickly sparked debate among European policymakers, media, and citizens. Far-right populist parties, staunchly opposed to immigration, capitalized on peoples' concerns and grew significantly in number and popularity. The populist *Alternative for Germany* (AfD) party, for example, adopted its anti-immigration stance in 2015, rejecting the "Willkommenskultur" policy altogether.

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<sup>14</sup> European Commission, "Managing migration better in all aspects: A European Agenda on Migration," 2015.

<sup>15</sup> "2015 in Review: How Europe Reacted to the Refugee Crisis." *International Centre for Migration Policy Development*, 2015.

AfD has advocated for canceling all funds that Germany spends on refugees and reallocating them to foreign countries that actively prevent immigration to Germany; returning immigrants to their home countries, regardless of safety, if their applications to remain in Germany are rejected; and changing the constitutional guarantees of applications for asylum and individual hearings in asylum cases. Policy proposals like these have cropped up among European political parties, highlighting immigration, integration, and religion.

**“The influx of refugees and discourse regarding institutional responses quickly sparked debate among European policymakers, media, and citizens.”**

### **2.2.2 Today’s Immigration Landscape**

Though immigration trends demonstrated increases and decreases since the influx in 2015, recent years have shown steady increases since 2020. According to the *European Commission*, approximately 5.1 million people immigrated from non-EU countries to the EU via regular or irregular migration in 2023, a significant rise from the estimated 2.7 million immigrants in 2021. As of January 2023, an estimated 27.3 million non-EU citizens were residing in the EU, making up 6.1 of the EU population—an increase from the previous year by 3.5 million.<sup>16</sup> These trends underscore ongoing concerns about border management, relocation, asylum processes, and integration efforts within EU Member States.

**“According to the *European Commission*, approximately 5.1 million people immigrated from non-EU countries to the EU via regular or irregular migration in 2023, a significant rise from the estimated 2.7 million immigrants in 2021.”**

Out of these millions of migrants, the *United Nations High Commission on Refugees* (UNHCR) and the *International Organization for Migration* (IOM) jointly estimated over 212,000 attempts to cross the Mediterranean from Algeria, Libya, and Tunisia to Europe in 2023. This marks a 33% increase from known departures in 2022.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> European Commission, “Migration and migrant population statistics,” 2024.

<sup>17</sup> International Organization for Migration, “Migrants Arrival to Europe: Joint Annual Report.”

The perilous nature of this journey has resulted in numerous fatalities and disappearances that increase every year, highlighting the urgent need for effective reforms that protect migrants and manage migration flows more humanely. Politically, immigration remains an incredibly divisive issue in the EU, influencing political parties, their constituents, and electoral outcomes. Since the “refugee crisis” of 2015, far-right and populist parties have continued to capitalize on anti-immigration sentiments, portraying migrants as a burden on social services and a threat to European identity.

Their arguments often hinge on the perceived clash between Islamic values and European norms, using incidents of terrorism and cultural tensions to exemplify this discordance. Geert Wilders, for example, leader of the *Party for Freedom* (PVV) in the Netherlands, has harshly criticized Islam and its practices, framing it as entirely incompatible with Western values and advocating for stringent measures to curb its influence, including immigration reform. His statements liken the Quran to Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* and deem the practice of veiling as “not acceptable...a terrifying sight”<sup>18</sup> that threatens order and security, reinforces harmful ideas towards Muslims in Europe, and jeopardizes interfaith integration and coexistence.

EU Member States continue to grapple with balancing immigration deterrence with integration and alternative measures to manage large migration flows effectively. Immigration remains a contentious issue, shaping political landscapes across the EU and impacting attitudes towards religion and its place in public, “European” life and culture. While populist parties exploit anti-immigration sentiments, portraying migrants as a threat to European identity, others advocate more welcoming approaches to uphold human rights, promote cultural diversity, and facilitate integrated civil societies.

**“...[far-right and populist parties] arguments often hinge on the perceived clash between Islamic values and European norms, using incidents of terrorism and cultural tensions to exemplify this discordance.”**

Navigating these complexities requires a policy framework that safeguards both security concerns and humanitarian values in an environment experiencing increased immigration and interconnectedness.

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<sup>18</sup> “In quotes: Geert Wilders.” *BBC*, 2010.

### 2.2.3 Religion in the EU

An evolving religious landscape, mainly influenced by immigration and globalization, necessitates consistent policy re-evaluation at multiple levels of governance. Competency over religious policy is shared between the *European Union*, national governments of Member States, and local/regional governments. Consequently, various political attitudes and policy frameworks exist to address religious freedoms, the role of religion in public life, and religious discrimination.

While the EU is a secular institution committed to separating church and state, it upholds the freedom of religion as a fundamental human right. This commitment is established in foundational treaties such as the *Treaty on the European Union* (TEU) and the *Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union* (TFEU), which provide legal frameworks under Articles 10 and 19, respectively, to protect freedom of religion. Additionally, the EU adheres to the *Charter of Fundamental Rights*, a legally binding document that reinforces this right in Article 10. In addition to these legal provisions, the EU actively engages with religious organizations and communities through mechanisms established in the 2009 *Treaty of Lisbon*. This treaty allows for dialogue with religious leaders and their communities, enabling the EU to work with them on pressing concerns and facilitate mutual understanding. The EU's *European External Action Service* has increasingly recognized religion as a pivotal dimension of its diplomatic framework, acknowledging the influence of religious dynamics on international affairs.

Though all the constitutions of EU Member States recognize freedom of religion as a right, the “content and intensity of the constitutional clauses greatly vary.”<sup>19</sup> Some states offer expansive protections that explicitly guarantee freedom of religious belief, practice, and expression without restrictions; for example, Spain guarantees religious expression without limitations on public manifestations.<sup>20</sup>

**“The EU’s *European External Action Service* has increasingly recognized religion as a pivotal dimension of its *diplomatic framework*, acknowledging the influence of religious dynamics on *international affairs*.”**

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<sup>19</sup> Alejandro Saiz Arnaiz, Aida Torres Perez, Marisa Iglesias and Roberto Toniatti, “Religious practice and observance in the EU Member States”, *European Parliament, Policy Dept.*, 2013.

<sup>20</sup> Boletín Oficial del Estado, “*Constitucion Española*”, 1978.



In contrast, other states impose more limited protections, such as France's ban on religious symbols in public schools. This reflects their national debate on secularism and the accommodation of religious expression within public institutions.

Christianity remains the predominant religion in the EU, accounting for approximately 72.8% of its population. Other religions like Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Judaism are also found, albeit in smaller numbers. However, the growth of Islam within Europe has sparked significant debate and concern within EU civil society. Xenophobic and Islamophobic rhetoric frequently intersect with immigration issues, as those fearing the perceived "Islamisation of Europe" often blame immigration influxes for the increase in Islam and look to specific methods of controlling immigration, shaping dialogue and opinions across Europe.

The anti-immigration platform championed by numerous populist parties has often relied upon and fed into extreme Islamophobia and fear of the perceived "Islamisation of Europe."<sup>21</sup> This rhetoric not only taps into deep-seated anxieties regarding cultural and "European" identities but amplifies concerns regarding security, integration, and the preservation of tradition in values, religion, and ways of life. Populist narratives frequently portray immigrants, particularly those with origins in Muslim-majority states, as threats to national identity and social cohesion. Scholars attribute this fervent xenophobia to a variety of causes: European "depression and...maniacal exaltation"<sup>22</sup> resulting from a falling status as a world power; conflict and violence in Muslim states, along with anti-Western terrorist attacks and Islamic fundamentalism; Europe's "well-financed Islamophobia industry."<sup>23</sup>

In conclusion, while the EU strives to uphold religious freedom and tolerance as fundamental values, the changing religious landscape and political realities present pressing challenges connecting religious discussion to immigration and integration in the EU. Addressing these challenges will require nuanced policies that respect human rights, promote societal cohesion, combat security concerns, and counter divisive rhetoric that exploits fear and exacerbates social tensions.

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<sup>21</sup> Bichara Khader, "Muslims in Europe or European Muslims? The Construction of a Problem," *Rivista Di Studi Politici Internazionali*, 2016.

<sup>22</sup> Julia Kristeva, "Homo Europaeus: Does a European Culture Exist?" *The Philosophical Salon*, 2015.

<sup>23</sup> Khader, "Muslims in Europe or European Muslims?" 2016.

## 3. Case Studies

### 3.1 France

France boasts a strong history of *laïcité*, or secularism, characterized by reforms that exclude religion and religious expression from public life. In contrast to other EU Member States' emphasis on "freedom of religion," France prioritizes "freedom from religion" above all else, reflecting its commitment to a secular society.<sup>24</sup> Article 1 of the *French Constitution of 1958* declares France as an "indivisible, secular, democratic and social republic,"<sup>25</sup> explicitly stating its policy of secularism in a way that most European countries' constitutions do not, opting instead to establish principles of state neutrality in religious affairs, freedom of religion, and the separation of church and state.

However, this principle of secularism is perceived by many French citizens to be under threat by the growing Muslim population within their borders, primarily immigrants from Islamic countries south of the Mediterranean Sea and their descendants. This demographic shift and subsequent perceptions not only influence French policy on religion but also impact integration efforts and immigration policies.

According to the *French National Institute of Statistics* (INSEE), in 2021, France was home to almost 7 million immigrants, comprising 10.3% of the population. Many of these immigrants hailed from southern Mediterranean countries, including 12% from Algeria, 12% from Morocco, and 4% from Tunisia.<sup>26</sup> Given France's historical colonial ties with these countries, these immigration patterns are representative of those influenced significantly by linguistic and familial connections. Though France does not record religious information on censuses, many of these immigrants come from Muslim-majority countries, bringing with them different religious and cultural backgrounds compared to the "traditional" French.

**“..., this principle of *secularism* is perceived by many French citizens to be under threat by the *growing Muslim population* within their borders,...”**

<sup>24</sup> Michael Adamsky, "Religion & Identity in Europe: How the Growth of Islam Affects European Identity and How Nations Address the Issue," *American University*, 2012.

<sup>25</sup> "Constitution," *Conseil Constitutionnel*, 2015.

<sup>26</sup> "One in 10 People in France an immigrant, says national statistics agency," *Le Monde*, 2023.

### 3.1.1 *Laïcité* and French Policy

To protect its principle of secularism, France has implemented a series of reforms and policies to maintain a secular public sphere. Notable among these reforms was the controversial 2004 law that banned religious symbols in public schools, a response spurred by an incident involving two Muslim girls wearing head coverings in a public school. The *French Parliament* voted “overwhelmingly” to ban “conspicuous religious symbols,” ostensibly to foster a sense of national identity and alleviate pressures on nonreligious students, an increasingly prevalent population among Western European countries.<sup>27</sup> While the ban also outlawed symbols of Judaism and Christianity in the process, it was widely perceived as primarily targeting Islamic representations in public due to the nature of the ban’s origin and the historical calls for banning headscarves in France since 1989.

Expanding on this foundation, France enacted the *Law on Religious Symbols in Public Services* in 2005, extending the ban to public service or administration employees to further detach religion from public society. This was followed by the *Law Prohibiting Face Coverings in Public* in 2010, which echoed the 2004 ban’s catch-all approach with anti-Muslim undertones. Under the argument of protecting public security, this banned the wearing of any clothing that concealed one’s face but was commonly considered the “burqa ban” for its thinly disguised attack on Muslim women who chose to wear burqas and niqabs.<sup>28</sup>

Despite condemnation by humanitarian entities such as *Amnesty International* and the *UN Human Rights Committee* and scrutiny by the *European Court of Human Rights*, it was ultimately upheld in 2014. It complied with the *European Convention on Human Rights*.<sup>29</sup> In the subsequent decade, France implemented additional reforms focused on regulating religious associations, reinforcing secular education in public schools, and tightening foreign funding of mosques in France, reflecting a fervent desire to maintain a religiously neutral public sphere.

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<sup>27</sup> Jon Henley, “French MPs vote for veil ban in state schools,” *The Guardian*, 2004.

<sup>28</sup> Shaira Nanwani, “The Burqa Ban: An Unreasonable Limitation on Religious Freedom or a Justifiable Restriction?” *Emory International Law Review*, 2011.

<sup>29</sup> Amnesty International, “Amnesty International Press Release: France votes to ban full face veils,” 2010.

These policies underscore a national debate about the place of religion in the public sphere, particularly in the context of increasing migration flows and the resulting larger migrant populations in France. Unlike earlier migration waves, which were perceived as temporary labor movements, the focus of migration has shifted increasingly towards permanent settlement, family reunification, and long-term integration into the labor market and communities. This shift in migration dynamics triggered varied responses, including heightened discrimination and prejudice spurred by concerns over permanent migration being a threat to “national identity, domestic security, and the social fabric.”<sup>30</sup>

**“Unlike earlier *migration waves*, which were perceived as temporary labor movements, the focus of migration has shifted increasingly towards *permanent settlement, family reunification, and long-term integration* into the labor market and communities.”**

These concerns have also fueled misperceptions about the Muslim population in France, as highlighted by the *Social Research Institute* in 2014. The study revealed significant overestimations of the proportion of Muslims in France, with French citizens estimating Muslims to compose 31% of the population when the statistical figure was less than 6%.<sup>31</sup> Such misconceptions underscore the societal tensions and fears around migration and reveal the lack of accurate understanding surrounding migrant communities in France.

It may be argued that, through policies and reforms, France is simply attempting to defend its principle of secularism as its population becomes simultaneously more divided and integrated. However, many Muslims in France, already experiencing discrimination and institutional hardships related to their migration and identity, view policies of more strict secularism as agents of more profound prejudice and polarization. The policies may “[deny] them the chance to live their full identity in their own country,” thereby alienating them from the traditionally “French” population and restricting opportunities for mutual understanding and coexistence.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Khader, “Muslims in Europe or European Muslims?” 2016.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Giovanna Dell’orto, “France is proud of its secularism. But struggles grow in this approach to faith, school, integration,” *AP News*, 2024.

The goal of French legislation, in the spirit of *laïcité*, is to promote national identity and cohesion by removing religious differences from the public sphere. However, stifling the expression of a minority group may also reduce people's ability to tolerate differences, inadvertently exacerbating societal divisions. Examining the effects of these restrictions and subsequent discrimination will highlight a need for integration that extends past secular coexistence. France faces a challenging national dialogue about accommodating religious diversity within a robust traditionally secular framework and ever-changing demographics that challenge such traditions.

**“The goal of French legislation...is to *promote national identity and cohesion* by removing religious differences from the public sphere. However, *stifling the expression* of a minority group may also reduce people's ability to tolerate differences, inadvertently *exacerbating societal divisions*.”**

### 3.1.2 Integrative Efforts

France faces a unique barrier to its integrative efforts: its commitment to secularism. Integration commonly incorporates pathways to the mutual understanding of diverse cultures and religions, opening space for coexistence and expression. However, as secularism is committed to the erosion of religion in the public sphere, this understanding is arguably impeded by policies that inadvertently restrict opportunities for interfaith communication.

This is particularly pertinent for migrants, who tend to be more religious and “less likely to accept secularization's efforts to keep religion quiet,” making it more challenging to reconcile their faith with a secular public sphere and thereby complicating their integration processes.<sup>33</sup> Often, intersecting patterns inform integrative policies in France regarding immigration and religion. As one of the EU's leading hosts of first- and second-generation immigrants, France is uniquely challenged with integrating families with deeper historical ties who still face xenophobic discrimination and socioeconomic disparities.

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<sup>33</sup> Michael Adamsky, “Religion & Identity in Europe: How the Growth of Islam Affects European Identity and How Nations Address the Issue,” *American University*, 2012.

Studies highlight that Muslims are 2.5 times less likely to receive a job interview than their Christian counterparts, and, on average, Muslim households make 15% less monthly than Christian households.<sup>34</sup> This demonstrates systemic barriers that hinder the economic integration of religious immigrants.

To combat these imbalances, France has implemented a variety of integrative efforts, managed primarily by governmental bodies such as the *General Directorate for Foreign Nationals in France* (DGEF) in the *Ministry of the Interior and Overseas*, alongside the *French Office for Immigration and Integration* (OFII). These initiatives focus on enhancing education, improving access to employment opportunities, and promoting social cohesion for immigrants and their descendants. Specific examples include free or subsidized French language courses to improve language proficiency, training programs, and employment support services provided by the OFII to enhance employability and tailored educational support for immigrant children.

Efforts to integrate religion in France have also included initiatives to promote dialogue and mutual understanding across religious communities. For example, in 2003, the French government collaborated with various Muslim organizations to create the *French Council of the Muslim Faith* (CFCM). CFCM serves as a crucial intermediary between the state and Muslim communities, which CFCM unites to amplify their voice in policy negotiations, promote integration, and provide religious guidance on living as a Muslim in secular France. This initiative demonstrates the government's commitment to engaging Muslim voices in shaping integration policies and fostering a sense of interfaith cooperation.

However, a significant challenge remains in the transition of integrative efforts beyond the initial five-year period they are intended to cover. Governmental policies focus on newcomers and transition to more "general, area-based policies that target disadvantaged neighborhoods" with high populations of immigrants rather than the immigrants themselves.<sup>35</sup> While this approach aims to address broader socioeconomic challenges, it does not wholly cater to ongoing integration needs, especially concerning religious and cultural dimensions beyond the five-year integration phase. Moreover, the absence of official census data on religion in France complicates efforts to tailor integrative policies effectively.

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<sup>34</sup> Claire L. Adida et al., "Identifying barriers to Muslim integration in France," *PNAS*, 2010.

<sup>35</sup> Angéline Escafré-Dublet, "Mainstreaming Immigrant Integration Policy in France," *Migration Policy Institute*, 2014.

As one of the leading EU host countries of first- and second-generation immigrants, significant populations needing continued support are excluded from the initial five-year integration framework and cannot be identified explicitly by the state. This lack of data and effective targeting makes it difficult to target those in greater need of integrative efforts based on religion or socioeconomic status or measure the impact of integration initiatives on migrant communities in a comprehensive manner.

Still, integration remains a focus of the French state and population, especially among immigrant communities seeking to further embed themselves in French civil society. Some Muslims have sought to develop an “Islam of France” (*Islam de France*), blending values and thereby “signaling one’s allegiance both to the French Republic and Islam.”<sup>36</sup> The aim then becomes fusing elements of Islam with French, though there is often disagreement on the compromises this entails on the scale of integration versus assimilation.

### 3.1.3 Conclusion

France’s approach to secularism, immigration, and integration reflects its deep-rooted commitment to the principle of *laïcité*, while simultaneously revealing the complex challenges of maintaining a secular public sphere in an increasingly globalized, diversified world. The French idea of “freedom from religion” has served as the basis of often contentious policies like banning hijabs and face coverings in public life, extending from public schools to the 2024 Olympic athletes representing France.

Anti-immigration sentiment and rampant Islamophobia are not the only things to blame for political and social discrimination; instead, Ahmet Kuru attributes this to *laïcité de combat* or “assertive secularism” that takes a more active stance on secularism and subsequently adopts “exceptionally restrictive policies.”<sup>37</sup> While these policies address all religious groups, it may be perceived that Muslims in France are targeted more intensely due to layers of Islamophobia, socioeconomic discrimination, and the tendency of Muslim immigrants to be more religious upon entering France, and thus having to make more visible changes to their lifestyles in order to adapt.

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<sup>36</sup> John R. Bowen, “Does French Islam Have Borders? Dilemmas of Domestication in a Global Religious Field,” *American Anthropologist*, 2004.

<sup>37</sup> Ahmet Kuru, “Secularism and State Policies Toward Religion: The United States, France, and Turkey,” *Cambridge University Press*, 2009.

Regardless, these measures have sparked significant debate about Muslim discrimination and the potentially harmful effects of France's strict adherence to *laïcité*. Concerns about immigration and religion are especially pertinent to France, as nearly half of their immigrants come from across the Mediterranean from countries like Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia. These countries, with strong colonial ties to France, share language similarities but differ in religion and attitudes towards the role of religion in public life.

**“Concerns about immigration and religion are especially pertinent to France, as nearly half of their immigrants come from across the Mediterranean from countries like Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia.”**

Subsequent demographic shifts have also occurred as these immigrants settle long-term in France; the perceived threat to secularism due to these shifts has fueled restrictive policies that arguably exacerbate social divisions and discourage mutual understanding, thus hindering effective integration. These policies not only impact religious expression, or the lack thereof but also impact broader issues of socioeconomic inequality and systemic discrimination faced by migrant communities. France has taken steps to foster integration, including initiatives for language acquisition, employment, and education for immigrants. The government has collaborated with Muslim organizations like the CFCM, reflecting an attempt to promote interfaith dialogue and involve minority voices in forming integration policies. Despite these moves towards cross-cultural cooperation, France is still challenged by xenophobia and fear regarding the “Islamization of France,” the absence of census data on religion, and its focus on general socioeconomic policies rather than tailored integration strategies.

France is inextricably linked to the Mediterranean region due to colonial legacies, immigration dynamics, and subsequent struggles to manage integration and religion in France. Thus, their position in the EU-Mediterranean policy framework has crucial implications for cross-cultural relations and patterns of movement. Ultimately, France must reconcile its commitment to secularism with the realities of a multicultural society as a result and catalyst of closer EU-Mediterranean relations. Its ability to tailor integrative policies and support the immigrant populations within their borders will be critical in addressing the dynamics of immigration, religion, and their broader implications on relations with the Mediterranean.



**“France is inextricably linked to the Mediterranean region due to colonial legacies, immigration dynamics, and subsequent struggles to manage integration and religion in France.”**

### 3.2 Spain

As an interesting case of historical interfaith coexistence, violent events of intolerance, and a delayed secularization process resulting from the Franco era, Spain offers profound insight into the EU-Mediterranean relationship. Spain occupies a unique geostrategic position at the edge of the Mediterranean, serving as a vital link between Europe and North Africa. This connection is not only geographic but also cultural, rooted in the historical period of *Convivencia* (711-1492), during which Muslims, Jews, and Christians coexisted peacefully together on the Iberian Peninsula. Influences from these religions are inextricable from Spanish culture, informing policy, conceptions of secularism and Spanish identity, and attitudes towards immigration.

Spain’s transition to a secular state was formalized with the 1978 Constitution, departing from the Francoist era’s religious policies. Under Franco’s regime, Catholicism was the official state religion, and Spanish public life was heavily influenced by Catholic doctrine. As a part of Spain’s subsequent democratization process beginning after Franco died in 1975, the 1978 Constitution explicitly prevented the adoption of an official state religion. However, it maintains that the State should “take into account the religious beliefs of Spanish society and...maintain appropriate cooperation relations with the *Catholic Church* and other confessions.”<sup>38</sup>

Addressing the Catholic faith, in particular, is telling, emphasizing its lasting place in Spanish culture despite Spain’s moves towards secularization. This article also implicitly allows the Spanish state to conduct census data on religion, cooperate more closely with religious institutions, and draw upon religious values in its laws according to whether or not they align with public views. Essentially, it acknowledges the importance of considering the religious beliefs of Spanish citizens rather than dampening them. This approach is evident in Spain’s public education system, in which religious classes of a denominational nature may be offered when a sufficient number of students request them and remain of a voluntary nature.

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<sup>38</sup> Zoila Combalía and María Roca, “Religion and the Secular State of Spain,” *International Center for Law and Religious Studies*, 2010.

Schools also provide alternative nondenominational courses that focus on religious history and culture. Unlike in France, where secularist policies have included progressive removal, Spain, unlike France, understands that the removal of religion in the public sphere is seemingly impossible given its history and thus makes no effort to ban religious symbols or eradicate religion from public schools. Instead, Spain has found ways of allowing religious expression while instituting boundaries that maintain the secularity of political life.

Notably, Spain has also stayed relatively removed from widespread, intense xenophobic movements. Although populist parties like *Vox* promote anti-Islam and anti-immigration platforms, the effect is less pronounced than in, for example, French or German political and civil society. Spain also experiences very low rates of “Islamist radicalization among Arab immigrants” in comparison, which could be attributed to effective integration strategies and successful fostering of interfaith communication among Spanish nationals and immigrants.<sup>39</sup>

**“...Spain has also stayed relatively removed from widespread, intense *xenophobic movements*. Although *populist parties* like *Vox* promote *anti-Islam* and *anti-immigration* platforms, the effect is less pronounced than in, for example, *French* or *German* political and civil society.”**

### 3.2.1 Integration and Spanish Nationalism

Integration into Spanish society is both challenged and aided by Spanish conceptions of national identity and history. Kamal Rahmouni of the *Association of Moroccan Immigrants in Spain* (ATIME) questioned then-Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy about the meaning of integration: “Which customs, which habits? Are they Andalusian ones or Catalan ones or Basque ones?”<sup>40</sup> This reflects the complex nature of Spanish identity, which is complicated by significant regional diversity regarding cultures, customs, and language.

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<sup>39</sup> Carmen González Enríquez, “Highs and Lows of Immigrant Integration in Spain,” *Real Instituto Elcano*, 2016.

<sup>40</sup> Jessica Tollette, “(Re)Defining Integration: The Case of Spain,” *Humanity in Action*, 2017.

Additionally, the “rhetorical abuse” of nationalism by Franco turned many away from the idea of rigid national identity, as Spaniards can associate such rhetoric with the dictatorship.<sup>41</sup> Spanish national identity is, as a whole, weaker than many other countries crucial to the EU-Mediterranean relationship, presenting both advantages and disadvantages to the question of integration. On the one hand, the fragmented nature of Spanish national identity allows for a more flexible approach to integration.

**“...the “rhetorical abuse” of *nationalism by Franco* turned many away from the idea of *rigid national identity*, as Spaniards can associate such rhetoric with the *dictatorship*.”**

The absence of a fixed national culture means that immigrants are relieved from adhering to a single set of customs. Instead, depending on the region, they can engage with diverse traditions and practices. Regional diversity can make integration more accessible, allowing immigrants to find what they identify with more closely and, thus, find their place in Spanish society rather than feeling pressured to conform to a single national identity.

Reflecting this attitude, Spanish policy on immigration is decentralized, allowing subnational governments to handle integration in ways that align with regional cultures and goals. Social services, housing, and employment policies are all devolved to the regions through measures like *Organic Law 4/2000*. The Catalan region is a particular example of progressive integration processes, with a Citizenship and Immigration Plan that extends social services to all residents rather than just citizens like some other regions. Furthermore, its *Catalan Law 10/2010* emphasizes cultural integration via language acquisition in Spanish and Catalan. Regionally tailored integrative policies offer a nuanced approach to helping immigrants integrate into Spanish life, accommodating a range of diverse backgrounds and needs.

**“Regionally tailored integrative policies offer a nuanced approach to helping immigrants integrate into Spanish life, accommodating a range of diverse backgrounds and needs.”**

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<sup>41</sup> Enríquez, “Highs and Lows of Immigrant Integration in Spain,” 2016.

Feeling less attached to a national identity may also make Spanish nationals more receptive to immigrants from other cultures. Spanish nationals may be more open to cultural diversity than the French or members of other states that feel strongly tied to their national identities and thus may perceive other cultures as a threat. Without a clear definition of “Spanish” identity, due to existing regional differences and pro-separatist movements, there is less fear of cultural intrusion and more space for intercultural exchange. The historical connections between dictatorship and nationalism implicitly discourage Spaniards from hardline nationalist perspectives and identities. This context helps foster a more inclusive and open-minded approach to multiculturalism, where diversity is perceived less as a threat and more as a natural facet of contemporary Spanish life.

On the other hand, the need for a clear and unified picture of what it means to be Spanish can hinder the integration process. Immigrants may need more certainty regarding aligning themselves in a society lacking a singular national identity or set of cultural norms. This ambiguity can lead to challenges in understanding social expectations and, thus, what is required for successful integration processes. Moreover, the varying regional attitudes towards immigration and integration and the decentralized nature of integration policy can lead to inconsistencies in immigrants’ experiences across Spain, depending on their location. This can lead to disparities in access to resources like education and employment, further complicating the integration process.

**“... the *varying regional attitudes* towards immigration and integration and the *decentralized nature of integration policy* can lead to *inconsistencies* in immigrants’ experiences across Spain, depending on their location.”**

Overall, the complex nature of Spain’s conception of national identity creates both opportunities and challenges for integration. While regional diversity and historical legacies allow for a more adaptable approach, it can also create uncertainty for immigrants navigating their place within Spanish society. Understanding the role of national identity and supporting efforts that ensure immigrants can fully participate in Spanish life is crucial for effective integration. By leveraging the successes of regionally tailored integrative policies with more cohesive national support, Spain can work towards creating a more inclusive society where all immigrants, regardless of location, feel sufficiently supported and integrated.

### 3.2.2 Xenophobia and Anti-Immigration Sentiment

Though Spain has not been entirely spared from European xenophobic movements, it has experienced them at lower levels of prominence and influence compared to select EU Member States such as France, Hungary, or Italy. Prior to 2018, Spain lacked a significant political party that campaigned primarily on xenophobic and anti-immigration sentiment. The issues Spain faced regarding immigration had not yet coalesced into a mainstream political movement that advocated for radical anti-immigrant policies. The political landscape, dominated by the *Spanish Socialist Workers' Party* (PSOE) and the *People's Party* (PP), primarily consisted of relatively moderate approaches to immigration. The lack of political polarization around immigration made room for more significant integration efforts, focusing on educational access, employment support, and social inclusion.

The emergence of the populist party *Vox* marked a significant shift in Spain's political arena. Founded in 2013, *Vox* initially struggled to gain traction but began to gain popularity in 2018 with its hardline stances on immigration, nationalism, and regional autonomy. In the April 2019 national elections, *Vox* captured 24 Congressional seats, and in November of the same year, surged to 52 seats. This strong performance indicated a growing acceptance of more radical anti-immigration rhetoric among a segment of the Spanish population, reflecting heightened concerns after the 2015 "refugee crisis." Although *Vox* did not become the dominant party in Spanish politics, consistently bested by left-wing PSOE and right-wing PP, its rise brought issues of immigration and national identity to the forefront, challenging the previously dominant moderate perspectives.

However, *Vox* has also lost popularity since its performance in the 2019 elections, dropping to 33 Parliamentary seats in the 2023 national elections. In 2024, *Vox* left its coalition government with the dominant, conservative *People's Party* in five regions due to disagreements regarding migration policy, particularly the PP's support for the central government's decision to redistribute hundreds of unaccompanied minors from the Canary Islands to the mainland. Again, the prominence of Spanish political parties with more moderate stances on immigration is evident: *Vox's* departure did not impact PP's policy direction, and PSOE Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez welcomed the news, framing it as a benefit to the "majority of Spaniards."<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Sam Jones, "Spain's far-right *Vox* quiets key regional governments over migration row," *The Guardian*, 2024.

Strong anti-immigration movements in Spain before 2018 were relatively low-profile and failed to gain significant political influence, facilitating more inclusive integration and religious coexistence efforts. Since there was no powerful, mainstream anti-immigration political force, a more inclusive approach to integration emerged, focusing on language acquisition, job training, and cultural exchange.

### 3.2.3 Conclusion

Spain's approaches to immigration and integration, at national and regional levels, reflect a complex interplay of historical, cultural, and political factors. Despite enduring challenges such as higher unemployment and poverty rates among immigrants compared to Spaniards and regional disparities in integration efforts, Spain has made notable strides in fostering integration and preventing xenophobic movements from gaining more substantial influence. Furthermore, religious organizations have been instrumental in advocating for religious intercommunication and, by extension, more effective integration that allows immigrants to practice their religion in the majority-Catholic, secular Spanish state.

As early as 1992, the *Islamic Commission of Spain* (CIE) brought together multiple large Islamic institutions to establish, in collaboration with the Spanish state, a *Cooperation Agreement* that guaranteed Muslims' rights to pause work on Friday for prayers and take days off for religious holidays, as well as provide input for food considerations in public spaces.<sup>43</sup> In 2021, Joseba Segura, the Catholic bishop of Bilbao, expressed support for adding Islam and Judaism on the Spanish tax forms as options for practices to donate a percentage of their income tax, as had already been an option for Catholicism.<sup>44</sup>

 **Spain's approaches to immigration and integration... reflect a complex interplay of historical, cultural, and political factors."**

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<sup>43</sup> Laura Mijares and Angeles Ramirez, "The 'Islamisation' of Immigration: Some Hypotheses about the Spanish Case," *European Institute of the Mediterranean*, 2024.

<sup>44</sup> Freddie Scott, "Religions in Spain pursue collaboration rather than confrontation," *European Academy of Religion and Society*, 2023.

In a similar vein, the *Catholic Church* has supported CIE campaigns to institute education on Islam for Muslim students in the Spanish education system. Additional initiatives like the *Pacto de Convivencia*, crafted in 2016 as a response to terrorism in Spain, serve as solid examples of organized cross-religious communication. The *Pacto de Convivencia* brings together important representatives from Catholicism, Islam, and other religions to “[demonstrate] unity” and “strengthen our response to extremism and discourses of hate.”<sup>45</sup> These individual and community-based efforts reflect an attitude of interreligious collaboration that fosters the integration of immigrants from different religious backgrounds, as the majority from south of the Mediterranean Sea do.

Combined with Spain’s relatively moderate approach to immigration, partially thanks to historical legacies from *Convivencia* to the Francoist era, along with weaker conceptions of a unified Spanish national identity and the lack of a sweeping anti-immigration political movement, these initiatives have transformed Spain into a “preferred destination country” for immigrants.<sup>46</sup> Despite existing challenges, 83% of Muslim immigrants in Spain consider themselves “adapted to Spanish life,”<sup>47</sup> reflecting successes in Spanish integration policy and cementing their status as a crucial model to look towards within the EU-Mediterranean relationship framework.

**“...*Pacto de Convivencia*, crafted in 2016 as a response to terrorism in Spain, serve as solid examples of *organized cross-religious communication*.”**

### 3.3 Italy

Situated at the heart of the Mediterranean, Italy plays a pivotal role in the EU-Mediterranean network, particularly concerning immigration and subsequent integrative and religious dynamics. Italy is a primary entry point for migrants and refugees seeking entry into Europe, facing over 157,000 immigrants by sea just in 2023.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>45</sup> “Manifiesto: Día Internacional de la Convivencia en Paz,” *Pacto de Convivencia*, 2024.

<sup>46</sup> Mohammed Dahiri, “Migration and Religious Diversity in Spain,” *Friedrich Naumann Foundation*, 2022.

<sup>47</sup> Dahiri, “Migration and Religious Diversity in Spain,” 2022.

<sup>48</sup> “Number of immigrants who arrived in Italy by sea from 2014 to 2023,” *Statista*, 2023.

This substantial flow of migrants highlights Italy's central position in managing migration via the Mediterranean and its critical role in shaping EU policies related to border management and the humanitarian response. Like other EU Member States, Italy is legally secular, officially renouncing Roman Catholicism as the state religion in 1985 and signing a concordat between the state and the *Catholic Church*. The *Charter of Values of Citizenship and Integration* recognizes Italy's commitment to secularity and religious freedom, aiming to "[promote] inter-faith and inter-cultural dialogue" to foster mutual respect and bridge societal divides.<sup>49</sup>

However, it also acknowledges that Italy "has developed in the perspective of Christianity...[which] has paved the way to modernity and the acquiring of the principles of freedom and justice,"<sup>50</sup> reflecting the pervasive influence of Roman Catholicism in Italian society. This cultural background informs Italy's immigration policies, integration strategies, and attitudes towards minority religions. Though Italy officially upholds secularism, it is designated by *Pew Research* as a state with a preferred religion, meaning that government policies and actions "clearly favor religion over others...in practice, do not treat all religions equally."<sup>51</sup>

This preferential treatment manifests in various forms, such as government funding and resources disproportionately benefiting Catholic institutions in comparison to other faiths. This notably contrasts Spain: though also considered a country with a preferred religion, it is regarded as offering more equitable opportunities across diverse religious groups. The intersection of immigration, integration, and religion in Italy is particularly complicated given its position in the Mediterranean context, experiencing high volumes of migrants and refugees each year.

**"...preferential treatment manifests in various forms, such as government funding and resources disproportionately benefiting Catholic institutions in comparison to other faiths. This notably contrasts Spain: though also considered a country with a preferred religion, it is regarded as offering more equitable opportunities across diverse religious groups."**

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<sup>49</sup> "Charter of Values of Citizenship and Integration," *Italian Ministry of Interior*, 2007.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> "Many Countries Favor Specific Religions, Officially or Unofficially," *Pew Research Center*, 2017.



Italy must grapple with the challenge of handling migration in ways that meet the standards of Italian nationals, immigrants, and humanitarian causes. Italy must also consider integrating diverse religious and cultural communities while navigating its historical ties to Roman Catholicism. This creates a dynamic policy and practice landscape, informing EU-Mediterranean relations and influencing ongoing debates about migration, integration, and religious coexistence in Europe.

### 3.3.1 The Preference for Christianity

As mentioned above, Italy is regarded as having a “preferred religion,” favoring Christianity due to its cultural and historical ties to Italian society. A prime example of this is the law demanding crucifixes be posted in Italian public schools, which was passed in the 1920s when Italy was still a fascist state. Though it is no longer compulsory, rather just Italian custom, these decisions have sparked discourse regarding the place of religion in schools and the preferential treatment of Christianity in Italian civil society. On the one hand, displaying a clear sign of religion in public schools goes against the principle of secularism. It arguably insinuates a non-secular connection between Christianity and the education students are receiving.

On the other hand, some Italians defend the placement of crucifixes in schools due to the “secularization of the crucifix.” This idea argues that the symbol is not necessarily religious but cultural, an integral part of Italian history and national identity that justifies its position in schools. Several controversies have been brought to light regarding this law, the most significant of which is the *Lautsi v. Italy* case, the rulings of which demonstrate Italian proclivity to protect Christianity. *Lautsi v. Italy*, brought first to multiple Italian courts and subsequently to the Lower Chamber and Grand Chamber of the *European Convention on Human Rights* (ECHR), caused uproar in Italy over the placement and disputed the meaning of crucifixes in schools. The Italian Administrative Court ruled that the law did not violate any principles, considering the crucifix not to be religious but “a symbol of a value system underpinning the Italian Constitution” and “part of the legal heritage of Europe.”<sup>52</sup> When Lautsi appealed to the *Italian Council of State*, they upheld the ruling that the crucifixes symbolized important Italian values like “tolerance, affirmation of one’s rights, the autonomy of one’s moral conscience vis-à-vis authority, human solidarity and the refusal of any form of discrimination.”

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<sup>52</sup> “Crucifixes in Italian State-school classrooms: the Court finds no violation,” *European Court of Human Rights*, 2011.

**“...the *crucifixes* symbolized important *Italian values* like ‘tolerance, affirmation of one’s rights, the autonomy of one’s moral conscience vis-à-vis authority, human solidarity and the refusal of any form of discrimination.’ ”**

The Lower Chamber of the ECHR reversed these decisions, ruling that the law did violate articles in the *European Convention of Human Rights* and related addendums. However, the Italian government appealed this decision to the Grand Chamber of the *Court*, which ultimately ruled in 2010 that the law did not violate the articles, as the crucifixes were an “essentially passive symbol” without substantial effect or influence.<sup>53</sup> Today, though crucifixes are not mandatory, they are certainly not prohibited, allowing for the exposure of Christianity in public spaces that adolescents attend every day. This case calls attention to the Italian emphasis on Christianity as the central religion. Even if the argument that crucifixes are relatively nonreligious is accepted, its place in schools as a secular historical symbol then demonstrates the extent to which Christianity is baked into Italian culture, history, and national identity.

The preference for Christianity in Italy often manifests in opposition to Islam. Despite being the second largest religious group in Italy, Islam is not officially recognized and consequently lacks privileges because it does not have a concordat with the Italian government. This is often used as “‘proof’ of Italian Muslims’ ‘uncooperative’ nature”; a leader from far-right, populist party *Lega Nord* (Northern League) inaccurately claimed Islam is “not capable of referring a representative to sign the concordat.”<sup>54</sup> In reality, this reflects the closed-minded treatment of Islam as a homogenous religion despite internal differences, such as those between Shia and Sunni Muslims. Italy has concordats with eight different Christian denominations in addition to Catholicism, as well as two sects of Buddhism, highlighting an unfair double standard for Islam. Policy frameworks for the building of mosques in Italy also reveal significant patterns of institutional xenophobia. Local administrations, rather than the national government, have jurisdiction over the planning and building places of worship, resulting in inconsistent policies across regions. Partially due to the lack of uniform, enforceable national policy, only eight official mosques exist in Italy as of 2021.

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<sup>53</sup> “Case of *Lautsi and Others v. Italy*,” *European Court of Human Rights*, 2011.

<sup>54</sup> Rebecca Wenmoth, “Italy’s State Secularism: Full of Contradictions,” *The New Federalist*, 2021.

**“...this reflects the *closed-minded treatment of Islam as a homogenous religion despite internal differences, such as those between Shia and Sunni Muslims.*”**

Conditions for building worship places are undefined and unquantified, which creates opportunities for local governments to find loopholes that “justify blocking the construction of new mosques.”<sup>55</sup> For example, the government is empowered to evaluate whether there is a sufficient need for a mosque rather than allowing religious communities to advocate for themselves and their necessities. The lack of quantification makes it easy for authorities to deny sufficient need for a mosque, thus preventing its construction. As a solution to the relative lack of mosques, over 1,200 Muslim prayer spaces have been established in Italy, a small percentage of which are authorized to be used for worship, and the majority are legally classified as cultural associations.

These spaces are under threat, however, by a law proposed in 2023 by Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni and an Italian far-right coalition that seeks the closure of “prayer spaces that are neither in mosques nor have never received formal approval to be used for worship,”<sup>56</sup> under the guise of upholding “urbanity, structural, and safety requirements.” This proposal disproportionately affects Muslims, whose religious spaces are already severely limited due to the blocking of mosque buildings. This restriction also targets creative alternatives, like situating prayer spaces in apartments, basements, garages, and warehouses. This law arguably violates the principle of religious freedom that guarantees one’s right to practice one’s religion and pushes to remove Islam not just from public life but also from private life by making it difficult to gather for prayer or community building legally.

Simultaneously, while Italy staunchly defends and justifies the existence of Christian symbols in public life, it also seeks to diminish the place of Islam in public and private life. Despite its constitutional commitment to secularism, the preference for Christianity is clear. It must be addressed, balancing respect for Italian culture and history with an increasingly multicultural society, particularly as a country at the crossroads of EU-Mediterranean immigration and relations.

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<sup>55</sup> Wenmoth, “Italy’s State Secularism: Full of Contradictions”, 2021.

<sup>56</sup> Islamic Monitor, “Italian law sparks outcry as Muslims prayer spaces face threat of closure.” *Islamic Research & Information Center*, 2023.

**“...over 1,200 Muslim prayer spaces have been established in Italy, a small percentage of which are authorized to be used for worship, and the majority are legally classified as cultural associations.”**

### **3.3.2 Populism and Resistance**

The rise of populism in Europe has manifested significantly in Italy, with profound implications for its immigration and integration policies. Populist parties, like Giorgia Meloni’s *Fratelli d’Italia* (Brothers of Italy) and Matteo Salvini-led *Lega Nord* (Northern League), have harnessed widespread concerns about immigration to bolster their electoral support. In the last Italian general elections, held in September 2022, the *Fratelli d’Italia* emerged as the top party, sparking debate regarding their fascist roots and reflecting an acceptance of xenophobic and anti-immigration sentiment in the Italian electorate.

Populism and far-right anti-immigration sentiment have led to a marked increase in discrimination, anti-immigrant sentiment, and xenophobia. These ideologies are instrumental in shaping and reinforcing policies that target immigrants, fueling an environment of hostility and exclusion. Contemporary anti-immigration advocates invoke fears of the “Islamization” of Europe or radicalization and terrorism. Amidst targeting from both civil society and political action, Muslim communities in Italy have reported feelings of “being attacked” and targeted, resulting in an “increasing sense of marginalization.”<sup>57</sup> Marginalization and societal divisions only separate the Italian population more deeply along religious and cultural lines, hindering the process of integration.

**“Marginalization and societal divisions only separate the Italian population more deeply along religious and cultural lines, hindering the process of integration.”**

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<sup>57</sup> Charlotte Davan Wetton, “Increasing Sense of Marginalisation Among Italy’s Muslim Community,” *France24*, 2024.

Because Islam does not possess a formal agreement with the Italian state, Muslim communities are often forced to negotiate with authorities on a local level, further exacerbating tensions and driving wedges in local communities that may otherwise be able to offer opportunities for cross-cultural collaboration and healthy interactions.

Despite the social and political attacks aimed at limiting the practice and influence of Islam in both public and private spheres, the response from Muslim communities in Italy has been, in some respects, contrary to expectations. One might think that discrimination and xenophobia would encourage Muslims in Italy to assimilate or otherwise dampen their connection to religion out of fear or lack of ability to practice. However, this has not been the case, as found by a study tracking religious transmission from parents to children in three distinct immigrant groups in Italy: Albanians (both Christians and Muslims), Moroccans (Muslims), and Romanians (Christians). Moroccan Muslims were the lone group regarded as practicing “reactive ethnicity theory,” meaning that their religiosity increased after immigration to Italy.<sup>58</sup> Furthermore, their habits tended to adapt to this new environment. For example, service attendance after immigration decreased, presumably due to the relative absence of mosques in Italy.

However, Moroccan Muslims had a better transmission of “praying behavior and the importance attached to religion,” signifying that though their options for physical and religious commitment had decreased, they instead emphasized daily behavior and spiritual commitment. These findings suggest that populist efforts to erode Islamic practices and reduce Islam in the private sphere have not quite succeeded as intended. Instead, they demonstrate the resilience of Mediterranean immigrants in preserving their religious and cultural identities despite facing the challenges of increasing xenophobia, discrimination, and dominance of far-right parties.

**“...populist efforts to erode Islamic practices and reduce Islam in the private sphere have not quite succeeded as intended. Instead, they demonstrate the resilience of Mediterranean immigrants in preserving their religious and cultural identities...”**

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<sup>58</sup> Iraklis Dimitriadis and Francesco Molteni, “Immigrants’ Religious Transmission in Southern Europe: Reaction or Assimilation? Evidence from Italy,” *Journal of International Migration and Integration*, 2021.

### 3.3.3 Conclusion

Integrative efforts by the Italian government are “often considered limited,” lacking both comprehensive policy frameworks and robust public support.<sup>59</sup> These efforts are frequently undermined by the influence of far-right parties in power and are not sufficiently supported by the Italian public. As a result, there is inadequate institutional support for immigrants, particularly for Muslim communities from the south of the Mediterranean, who already face significant barriers to integration due to their diverse cultural and religious backgrounds.

Interestingly, the *Catholic Church* has played a crucial role in supporting immigrants, fostering inclusion, and establishing interfaith relations with groups entering Italy from Muslim-majority countries. At a national level, the *Church* has actively advocated for immigrants’ rights by opposing anti-immigration policies, offering political representation for immigrants, and lobbying for citizenship law reformation. Pope Francis, in particular, has been vocal in criticizing increasingly restrictive immigration policies and expressing his support for refugee seekers. This has sparked discourse within Italian civil society but importantly reaffirmed the *Church’s* commitment to inclusion and solidarity rather than exclusion and restriction. The *Catholic Church* also “holds multiple ‘satellite’ entities” working on their behalf to support immigrants and integrative efforts, such as the *Caritas* and *Migrantes Foundations* and *Centro Astalli*.<sup>60</sup>

These entities prioritize political change, providing services and material resources to immigrants, building interfaith dialogue, and various additional efforts to ease the paths of immigrants and refugees in Italy. Though much work remains regarding the *Catholic Church’s* advocacy on local and regional levels and increasing cultural diversity in their parishes, it is clear that their integrative efforts have benefitted Muslim immigrant communities in Italy. Fostering religious coexistence and collaboration has proved essential, especially in a sociopolitical context saturated with xenophobia and anti-immigration rhetoric. With over 35,000 arrivals by sea in 2024 alone, Italy has served as a crucial entry point to the EU for millions of immigrants over the past decade.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Dimitriadis and Molteni, “Immigrants’ Religious Transmission in Southern Europe,” 2021.

<sup>60</sup> Marco Guglielmi et al., “Catholic Parishes and Immigrants in Italy: Insights from the Congregations Study in Three Italian Cities,” *Societies*, 2024.

<sup>61</sup> “Italy weekly snapshot,” *UNHCR*, 12 August 2024.

Its challenges regarding immigration, integration, and religion are shaped by a complex interplay of factors, including Italy's historical and cultural ties with Roman Catholicism, a secularizing *European Union*, and the rise of populism in Europe. The *Catholic Church* and other advocacy groups remain essential in demonstrating actionable opportunities for more inclusive and tailored approaches to integrating Muslim immigrant communities. This contrasts sharply with the populist-led government's attempts to restrict and limit Islam in Italy, reflecting growing supranational concerns regarding the "Islamization of Europe" underlining EU-Mediterranean policies. Occupying a crucial geostrategic position at the crossroads of the Mediterranean, Italy's position in balancing immigration issues with integration challenges will have significant implications for its role in shaping EU immigration policy and EU-Mediterranean relations.

### 3.4. Greece

Greece's strategic location in the Mediterranean Sea profoundly impacts its approach to immigration, integration, and religion. As "the major gateway" for irregular immigration from Africa and Asia into Europe, Greece has faced substantial migratory concerns regarding the influx of people across the Mediterranean and pressure from the EU to adequately manage these migration flows.<sup>62</sup> Their position holds significant implications for broader EU migration policy and relationship with the Southern Mediterranean region, particularly policies concerning border management and humanitarian responses.

While Greece operates as a secular state, with the Constitution maintaining the separation of church and state, Greek Orthodoxy is recognized as the "prevailing religion," entwined deeply in the cultural fabric. Greece is designated by *Pew Research* as having a preferred religion, with disproportionate funding and resources allotted towards Greek Orthodoxy in terms of religious education and property.<sup>63</sup> However, Greece faces a secularization movement among its inhabitants that challenges the place of one religion in public life and state affairs.

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<sup>62</sup> Georgios E. Trantas and Eleni D. Tseligka, "Religion and Forced Displacement in Greece," *The Foreign Policy Centre*, 2020.

<sup>63</sup> "Many Countries Favor Specific Religions, Officially or Unofficially," *Pew Research Center*, 2017.

The entrenchment of religion in a secularizing and increasingly multicultural society creates both opportunities and barriers to the integration of hundreds of thousands of immigrants, who frequently come from Muslim-majority states south of the Mediterranean. Integration in Greece is unique due to its exceptionally high volume of incoming migrants, the pressure to sufficiently manage their migrations, and the status of Greek Orthodoxy as the prominent religion despite the secularizing nature of the state. Greece must grapple with humanitarian concerns, the plights of Muslim communities within their borders, and increasing multiculturalism to establish integrative policies that adequately protect and support inhabitants of all religions.

### 3.4.1 Barriers to Integration

Despite Greece's efforts towards integrating immigrants, several barriers significantly impact the Greek population and its immigrant communities. One prominent issue is the lack of official prayer spaces and community areas for Muslim immigrants. Similarly to Italy, Greece has historically struggled to accommodate the religious needs of its Muslim population, particularly regarding daily prayer and opportunities for community connection.

Before November 2020, Athens was the only European capital without an official mosque, forcing Muslim immigrants to establish unofficial prayer spaces in underground garages or basements. These makeshift spaces, however, were "incredibly difficult to locate and contact," leaving many without sufficient opportunity to practice their faith and engage with their community.<sup>64</sup> Constructing an official mosque was made difficult by delays due to a lack of support from Greek nationals and incidents of vandalism.

**“Before November 2020, Athens was the only European capital without an official mosque, forcing Muslim immigrants to establish *unofficial prayer spaces* in underground garages or basements.”**

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<sup>64</sup> Connor Bran, “Building dialogue,” *Nanovic Institute for European Studies*, 2020.



A 2020 report found that 65% of the Greek population held “unfavorable views of Muslims.” It was “unlikely to support the mosque’s construction,” making it difficult to proceed and reflecting broader societal resistance to integration and inclusion.<sup>65</sup> The opening of Athens’ first official mosque in November 2020 marked a sizeable step forward in integrating Muslim communities, providing them with a “dignified place of worship” that implicitly solidifies their place in Greece and, thus, combats discrimination.<sup>66</sup> An official religious institution also dramatically augments the opportunities for interfaith dialogue at administrative levels by uniting the Muslim community under a larger entity with operational capability and giving the Greek state a point of contact to foster connections and collaboration.

Even with the eventual success of building Athens’ official mosque, Greece’s integrative initiatives have historically struggled to translate legal frameworks into effective practices that provide necessary support for migrant communities. The *HELIOS Programme* (Hellenic Integration Support for Beneficiaries of International Protection), established in 2019 by the *International Organization for Migration* (IOM), served as the primary medium for integration processes, focusing on support for migrants in various sectors including education, labor market, health, and social welfare.

Despite its intentions, the *Programme* faced criticism for a “significant disparity between the possibilities and provisions provided by the respective legal framework and the reality as reflected on the field.”<sup>67</sup> In each aspect, the *Programme*’s effectiveness was impeded by bureaucratic and social hindrances, including difficulties in students’ enrollment processes, lack of female health personnel, and stringent eligibility requirements for social welfare programs. Thus, the *Programme* did not reach many immigrants to an adequate degree.

**“..., Greece’s integrative initiatives have historically struggled to translate legal frameworks into effective practices that provide necessary support for migrant communities.”**

<sup>65</sup> Bran, “Building dialogue,” 2020.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Angelo Tramountanis, “Pathways to Integration and Dis-integration: An Assessment of the Greek Immigration Policy for the Inclusion of Immigrants, Applicants and Beneficiaries of International Protection,” *Challenging Mobilities in and to the EU during Times of Crises*, 2022.

In 2021, the *HELIOS Programme* was succeeded by Greece's *National Strategy for the Social Integration of Asylum Seekers and Beneficiaries of International Protection*. This new strategy narrowed its subjects, excluding third-country nationals already residing in Greece who were not classified as asylum seekers. Not only does this policy prove less comprehensive than the former, but it also overlooks the fact that 6.2% of the Greek population, which consists of third-country nationals, still needs deeper integration.

**“[*National Strategy for the Social Integration*] narrowed its subjects, excluding third-country nationals already residing in Greece who were not classified as *asylum seekers*.”**

Greece's performance on the *Migration Integration Policy Index* (MIPEX) underscores these challenges. It ranks slightly unfavorable for education and political participation, with average scores in other categories such as health, labor market mobility, and permanent residence. MIPEX describes Greece's approach as providing equal rights to migrants but not equal opportunities, leading to “equality on paper” with policies generally unfavorable towards newcomers.”<sup>68</sup> Moreover, Greece continues to face challenges related to humanitarian failures in managing migration. In June of 2023, an overloaded ship of refugees and migrants from Egypt, Pakistan, Palestine, and Syria capsized in the Mediterranean Sea. Accounts of the disaster are contrasting: Greek authorities claimed the passengers refused help. At the same time, survivors maintain they repeatedly sought assistance and argued that the Greek Coast Guard's attempted towing of the boat caused it to capsize, which the Coast Guard denies.<sup>69</sup> Despite these conflicting reports, human rights entities such as UNHCR have stressed that Greek authorities are responsible for coordinating rescues and saving lives. Greece has previously faced accusations of deliberately towing migrant vessels out of their territory to “avoid the legal responsibility to rescue” and subsequently process asylum requests.”<sup>70</sup> In conclusion, Greece's approach to immigration and integration is marked by significant challenges, including societal tensions, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and humanitarian issues. Addressing these barriers to integration is crucial for fostering a more inclusive and effective integration framework, particularly given Greece's important position at the crossroads of Europe and the southern Mediterranean region.

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<sup>68</sup> European Commission, “Governance of migrant integration in Greece,” 2024.

<sup>69</sup> Florence Davey-Attlee et al., “Greece Migrant Boat Disaster Investigation,” *CNN*, 2023.

<sup>70</sup> Davey-Attlee et al., “Greece Migrant Boat Disaster Investigation,” 2023.

### 3.4.2 Secularization in Greece

Similar to many Western European countries, Greece is undergoing a secularization process in civil society, prompting discourse over the balance between secularism, a rich history of Greek Orthodoxy, and increasing multiculturalism resulting from immigration patterns. Historically, Greece was predominantly composed of ethnic Greeks who identified as Greek Orthodoxy, which played a central role in public and private life. The *Greek Orthodox Church*, despite formal legal separations, was closely intertwined with the state. This relationship reinforced a relatively mono-ethnic, mono-cultural, and mono-religious national identity.

However, this has changed in recent years, with a noticeable trend of younger Greeks moving away from religious practices or otherwise transitioning the place of religion to the private sphere rather than the public. In 2022, this shift was reflected in public opinion, with a majority of Greek citizens favoring the removal of the *Church* from political affairs. Many also advocated for optional religious classes or compulsory education on all religions as opposed to just Greek Orthodoxy. This reflects a growing desire of the Greek population for a more inclusive approach to education and public life, especially as society grows increasingly pluralistic and multicultural. These evolving perspectives also highlight a growing perception among some Greek citizens that the *Church* is out of touch with contemporary values, labeling it “backward” or “incompatible with modernity.”<sup>71</sup> Issues like abortion and gay marriage have become points of contention that highlight the perceived incompatibility of the *Church* with modern societal values. These critiques underscore a potential broader shift of the *Church* being seen not as a religious institution guiding daily life but as a “cultural remnant” of Greek national identity, similar to the Italian emphasis on Roman Catholicism as a part of Italian culture and identity, rather than a player in contemporary social debates and political matters.<sup>72</sup>

**“The *Greek Orthodox Church*, despite formal legal separations, was *closely intertwined with the state*. This relationship reinforced a relatively *mono-ethnic, mono-cultural, and mono-religious* national identity.”**

<sup>71</sup> Davey-Attlee et al., “Greece Migrant Boat Disaster Investigation,” 2023.

<sup>72</sup> Alexandros Sakellariou, “Young People and the Process of Secularisation in Contemporary Greek Society,” *Religions*, 2022.

Despite the secularization of Greek society and criticisms of Greek Orthodoxy, the *Church* and several of its satellite entities have played significant roles in the integration of migrant communities and fostering of interfaith dialogue.<sup>73</sup> Reflecting theological values of inclusivity and peaceful coexistence, the *Greek Orthodox Church* has run initiatives for legal and psychosocial support, shelters for unaccompanied minors, and interreligious dialogue. It funds *Integration Centre for Migrant Workers-Ecumenical Refugee Programme* (ICMW-ERP), created in 2012 to assist immigrants with legal and social support, translation, family reunification, and inter-ecclesiastical programs to promote interreligious connection. Identifying the “inadequacy of knowledge and insight on the part of the state” regarding Muslim immigrants, ICMW researched to document informal places of worship, which was especially crucial for migrant populations living without access to an official mosque.<sup>74</sup>

Through these activities, the *Greek Orthodox Church* has demonstrated an ongoing commitment to social integration and cultural inclusivity, challenging some perceptions about the *Church* being out of touch with contemporary values. Even amidst a secularizing society wherein the *Church* is becoming decreasingly part of public and private Greek life, opportunities are created for greater interreligious communication and integration.

**“Even amidst a secularizing society wherein the [*Greek Orthodox*] *Church* is becoming decreasingly part of public and private Greek life, opportunities are created for *greater interreligious communication and integration.*”**

### 3.4.3 Conclusion

In conclusion, Greece’s strategic position as a major entry point for migration into Europe presents both complex challenges and unique opportunities through its approaches to immigration, integration, and religion. With a deeply entrenched commitment to religion in the public, political, and social spheres, increasing secularization and multiculturalism create a developing and sometimes contentious environment for policy development and implementation.

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<sup>73</sup> “The Church of Greece has been playing an essential role in welcoming and facilitating the integration of refugees,” *Orthodox Times*, 2022.

<sup>74</sup> Georgios E. Trantas and Eleni D. Tseligka, “Religion and Forced Displacement in Greece,” *The Foreign Policy Centre*, 2020.

Various factors like structural barriers, inadequate legal frameworks, and resistance from the Greek population hinder integration. Although recent developments, such as the establishment of Athens' first official mosque, signal steps toward addressing the divide between Greek nationals and migrant communities, the journeys to achieve these integrative advances highlight significant challenges in the form of societal resistance and bureaucratic hurdles. Simultaneously, the transition from the *HELIOS Programme* to Greece's new national strategy reflects the state's narrowing focus and failure to recognize the needs of all third-country nationals residing in Greece.

The recent secularization trends, especially in a multicultural society, add another layer of complexity to the integration landscape. As Greek society grows gradually more distant from traditional Greek Orthodoxy, the challenge of balancing secularism with the country's historical and cultural identity through religion becomes more pronounced. Historically intertwined with the state, the *Greek Orthodox Church* is becoming increasingly valued not as an actor in political affairs and public life but as a private matter and cultural emblem of Greek national identity. The *Church* has demonstrated a commitment to supporting migrant communities through initiatives that foster integration and interfaith dialogue, reflecting a shifting role of the *Church* in Greek society.

Ultimately, Greece's experience illustrates the common challenge of integrating diverse migrant populations while managing the intersection of secularization and rich religious history. As the first, and sometimes final, country for many migrants from south of the Mediterranean, Greece bears significant responsibility in managing immigration and integration, especially under the *European Union's* complex political and social pressures. Greece must prove that it can adequately handle migration flows and maintain a successfully integrated civil society amidst increasing xenophobic and anti-immigration discourse in the broader European world. As Greece's approach and subsequent results will undoubtedly influence the EU-Mediterranean policy framework, the need for continued dialogue, reform, and intercultural integration is crucial.

**“Greece must prove that it can adequately handle *migration flows* and maintain a successfully *integrated civil society* amidst increasing *xenophobic* and *anti-immigration* discourse in the broader European world.”**

## 4. Conclusion

The exploration of immigration, integration, and religion in the EU-Mediterranean framework through the case studies of France, Spain, Italy, and Greece reveals a complex landscape of overlapping challenges and opportunities. Each country is shaped by historical, cultural, geographic, and social components, resulting in diverse attitudes and approaches to migrants from south of the Mediterranean, the majority of whom identify as Muslim from Muslim-majority countries. Increasing multiculturalism in the *European Union* due to migration influxes presents ample opportunities for intercultural and interfaith collaboration, provided the governments of EU Member States and their populations work to effectively integrate migrant communities into the fabric of European society concerning their backgrounds. However, common themes that underscore the difficulties of improving integration and fostering interfaith dialogue across the region emerge.

In France, assertive secularism and a commitment to *laïcité* drive integrative policies that push religion and religious symbols to the private sector, creating challenges for the large Muslim population seeking to express themselves and live fully in their religious identities. This tense balance between upholding secular values and addressing the needs of a multicultural society is most apparent in France. However, it reflects a broader European challenge of grappling with immigration from the southern Mediterranean region. Spain and Italy, both dealing with significant immigration populations, demonstrate the critical role of national identity in shaping integrative frameworks.

Spain's efforts at inclusive policies contrast Italy's more restrictive relationship with its diverse religious communities, mainly due to their religious history and entrenchment of religion in national and cultural identity. However, the *Roman Catholic Church's* role in fostering inclusive integration signals a movement towards interfaith collaboration that, looking forward, can serve as an example of the state of progression and inclusion. Greece, arguably the most crucial gateway from Southern Mediterranean states into Europe, faces intense pressure to manage its borders and migrant populations. Though its state-driven policies are not as restrictive as Italy's, Greece still falls short in addressing the needs of all migrants within its borders, hindering effective integration. The *Greek Orthodox Church* has stepped up to promote interfaith communication despite increasing secularization and a decreasing role in political affairs and public life.

As we look forward, these cases reveal substantial opportunities available to governments, religious entities, and EU populations. The secularization of Greek society can create room for encouraging diverse religious expression and increased tolerance for multiculturalism rather than restricting religion like in France. Spain's inclusive approach to integration despite historical national ties to Roman Catholicism underscores the possibilities for Italy to do the same, balancing national identity with its growing migrant populations. Examples of interfaith communication and migrant support initiatives, as established by the *Greek Orthodox Church*, *Roman Catholic Church*, and Spanish legal frameworks, can promote more successful integration policies at various levels of government and civil society. However, prescient challenges remain. Humanitarian concerns regarding migration and asylum processes across the Mediterranean call into question the ethics of current policy frameworks and highlight a need for greater consideration of migrants' rights. Furthermore, the rise of populism and nationalist, anti-immigrant rhetoric in European politics poses a significant threat to the advancement of inclusive policies regarding immigration, integration, and religion.

Populist arguments often exploit and exacerbate fears and societal divides, creating a feedback loop of misunderstanding and disrespect that, in turn, feeds these fears and hinders the development of religious communities and the overcoming of socioeconomic disparities. Addressing these challenges will require public support for policies prioritizing humanitarian concerns and equality, highlighting the preceding need for interfaith understanding that promotes social cohesion and solidarity across diverse communities. In summary, the EU-Mediterranean framework is marked by significant obstacles and promising opportunities regarding immigration, integration, and religious coexistence. United by their significant experiences with migrants south of the Mediterranean, the key countries of France, Spain, Italy, and Greece highlight the need for greater focus on migrant needs and inclusivity in integration frameworks. Emphasizing intercultural communication and building alliances across national and religious lines can help address divisive issues to create a more successfully integrated European community, with heightened consideration for struggling migrant communities. As Europe navigates these complexities, a commitment to interfaith dialogue and shared values will be crucial in shaping a future that embraces diversity, progression, and mutual understanding.

***“Spain’s inclusive approach to integration despite historical national ties to Roman Catholicism underscores the possibilities for Italy to do the same, balancing national identity with its growing migrant populations.”***

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## **About CFGI**

The Center for Faith, Identity, and Globalization (CFGI) is the interdisciplinary research and publication unit of Rumi Forum. CFGI contributes to the knowledge and research at the intersection of faith, identity, and globalization by generating academically-informed analyses and facilitating scholarly exchanges. CFGI's spectrum of themes will cover contemporary subjects that are relevant to our understanding of the connection between faith, identity, and globalization, such as interfaith engagement, religious nationalism, conflict resolution, globalization, religious freedom, and spirituality.

## **About the Author**

Natalie Dolenga is a senior attending Syracuse University's Maxwell School of Citizenship & Civic Affairs in Syracuse, NY. She will graduate in December 2024 with an international relations major (with concentrations in Europe and International Security & Diplomacy) and minors in Spanish and Political Science. In addition to being an ICCAE Scholar (Intelligence Community Centers for Academic excellence) and Honors student in the Renée Crown Honors Program, she has worked as a Peer Leader for first-year students and co-founded WINS (Women in National Security) at SU. Natalie has a passion for languages, having been awarded the Seal of Biliteracy in 2020 for the Spanish language and currently studying both Spanish and French. As an ICCAE Scholar, she participated in their immersive Summer Seminar in DC, where she engaged in an analytic simulation involving daily intelligence reports and a final National Security Council meeting. She also spent the Spring 2024 semester studying abroad in Madrid, Spain, for an opportunity to immerse herself in Spanish culture, international relations and EU affairs.

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