

Europeans' Personal and Social Wellbeing

Topline Results from Round 6 of the
European Social Survey

ESS Topline
Results Series

Issue

5

Accessing the European Social Survey Data and Documentation

The European Social Survey European Research Infrastructure Consortium - ESS ERIC - provides free access to all of its data and documentation. These can be browsed and downloaded from its website: <http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org>.

Specific initiatives have been developed to promote access to and use of the growing dataset, including EduNet and NESSTAR, both of which are available via the ESS website.

EduNet

The ESS e-learning tool, EduNet, was developed for use in higher education. It provides hands-on examples

and exercises designed to guide users through the research process, from a theoretical problem to the interpretation of statistical results. Nine topics are now available using data from the ESS.

NESSTAR

The ESS Online Analysis package uses NESSTAR which is an online data analysis tool. Documentation to support NESSTAR is available from the Norwegian Social Science Data Services (<http://www.nesstar.com/index.html>).

Message from Rory Fitzgerald Director, ESS ERIC, City University London (UK)

The European Social Survey (ESS) has always aimed to promote the use of societal indicators, based upon citizens' personal evaluations of their society, in order to complement the undoubtedly important harder economic and social outcome measures. The ESS Round 6 Personal and Social wellbeing module meets that aim by nicely deconstructing the overall concept of 'wellbeing' and providing a unique, detailed cross-national

examination of this complex concept. Furthermore by providing far more detail than having only a single question to measure wellbeing, the European Social Survey allows analysts to suggest more detailed policy implications in an area that has moved up and remains salient in Europe-wide debates in this field.

I would like to thank the original questionnaire design team and the authors of this booklet for their excellent contribution to these debates.

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April 2015

Europeans' Personal and Social Wellbeing: Topline Results from Round 6 of the European Social Survey

Karen Jeffrey, Saamah Abdallah and Annie Quick

Introduction

Generally, people would agree that a society where more people have a better positive overall experience of life, or greater wellbeing, is something worth striving for. This suggests that policy makers should be interested in how to create the conditions for this to happen. For a long time, there has been a widespread assumption that prioritising economic growth is the best way to maximise wellbeing (e.g. OECD, 2006). However, this view is increasingly being contested. As studies demonstrate that the positive relationship between economic growth and self-reported wellbeing is small or negligible beyond a modest level of affluence (Layard, 2005; Bartolini & Bilancini, 2010; Easterlin, 2013), it becomes clear that a better understanding of what does contribute to wellbeing is needed. Data on wellbeing have an important role to play. Only with systematic and detailed information about citizens' experiences of different facets of wellbeing, collected alongside wider information about citizens' lives, can we hope to gain a robust understanding of what drives wellbeing, and then develop policies designed to maximise it.

Much progress has been made on this front, with reliable national wellbeing data being collected by

official national bodies in many European countries (Abdallah and Mahony, 2012). The Personal and Social Wellbeing Module first included in Round 3 of the European Social Survey (ESS), and repeated in Round 6, is an important contribution to this bank of information.

The data from Round 6 of the ESSⁱ was collected through a series of hour-long, in-person interviews with individuals aged 15 years or older in 29 European countries,ⁱⁱ providing just under 54,600 unique responses. Survey respondents were selected using strict random probability sampling, with a minimum target response rate of 70%, to try and ensure that representative national samples were obtained.ⁱⁱⁱ The ESS's high quality translation of questions^{iv} and systematic international sampling approach enables reliable cross-country comparisons to be made.

This booklet describes the topline findings from our preliminary analysis of these data,^v including an exploration of the multidimensional nature of wellbeing; discussion of how scores on the different wellbeing dimensions vary across Europe; and an examination of the relationship between income and wellbeing.

Is there more to wellbeing than life satisfaction?

Many surveys rely upon single-item measures of happiness or life satisfaction as the sole indicator of wellbeing (Abdallah and Mahony, 2012). However, existing theoretical (Vittersø, et al., 2010) and empirical (Huppert & So, 2009) studies have suggested that wellbeing is a multidimensional concept, and such single-item measures might not capture its intricacies. The inclusion of a rich range of personal and social wellbeing items in Round 6 of the ESS enables a thorough exploration of this hypothesis.

Using a combination of theoretical models and statistical analysis,^{vi} we identified six key dimensions of wellbeing, made up of 35 of the items within the Personal and Social Wellbeing Module (see Table 1). The dimensions are:

- Evaluative wellbeing, which covers individuals' overall estimations of how well their life is going, including feeling satisfied with life and feeling happy overall.
- Emotional wellbeing, which includes positive day-to-day feelings such as happiness and enjoyment of life, and lack of negative feelings such as anxiety and depression.
- Functioning, which includes feelings of autonomy, competence, engagement, meaning and purpose, self-esteem, optimism and resilience.
- Vitality, which includes sleeping well, feeling energised and feeling able to face the challenges that life presents.
- Community wellbeing, which is concerned with an individual's feelings about the community in which they live, including trust in other people, feeling supported by members of the community, and experiencing a sense of neighbourliness.
- Supportive relationships, which relate to individuals' feeling that there are people in their lives who offer support, companionship, appreciation, and with whom intimate matters can be discussed.

Table 1: Items from the wellbeing module grouped by the dimension of wellbeing they relate to

WELLBEING DIMENSION	ESS SURVEY ITEM
Evaluative wellbeing	How satisfied with life as a whole
	How happy are you
Emotional wellbeing	Felt sad, how often past week
	Felt depressed, how often past week
	Enjoyed life, how often past week
	Were happy, how often past week
	You felt anxious, how often past week
Functioning	You felt calm and peaceful, how often past week
	Free to decide how to live my life
	Little chance to show how capable I am
	Feel accomplishment from what I do
	Interested in what you are doing
	Absorbed in what you are doing
	Enthusiastic about what you are doing
	Feel what I do in life is valuable and worthwhile
	Have a sense of direction
	Always optimistic about my future
	There are lots of things I feel I am good at
In general feel very positive about myself	
Functioning	At times feel as if I am a failure
	When things go wrong in my life it takes a long time to get back to normal
	Deal with important problems
Vitality	Felt everything did an effort, how often past week
	Sleep was restless, how often past week
	Could not get going, how often past week
	Had lot of energy, how often past week
Community wellbeing	Most people can be trusted / can't be too careful
	People try to take advantage
	Most of the time people are helpful
	Feel people in local area help one another
Supportive relationships	Feel close to the people in local area
	How many with whom you can discuss intimate matters
	Feel appreciated by those you are close to
	Receive help and support
Supportive relationships	Felt lonely, how often past week

Source: European Social Survey Round 6, 2012

For each dimension, we calculated an index score, using the results of answers to the questions within the dimension (see Table 1). Table 2 shows the countries according to their average scores for each wellbeing dimension. To enable quick identification of the highest and lowest ranking countries, the scores have been colour coded using a traffic-light system so that green indicates the highest wellbeing within each dimension, and red indicates the lowest wellbeing. In Table 2, the countries are sorted from highest to lowest according to the evaluative wellbeing dimension, for ease of comparison with the patterns of highest and lowest ranking countries across the other wellbeing dimensions. We can see that the countries with the highest evaluative wellbeing scores also tend to rank highly on the other five dimensions of wellbeing; and the countries with the lowest evaluative wellbeing generally rank lower on the

other five dimensions. However, this pattern isn't entirely consistent, with the most notable divergence in countries' rankings across the dimensions apparent in comparisons between the evaluative wellbeing dimension and the community wellbeing and vitality dimensions.

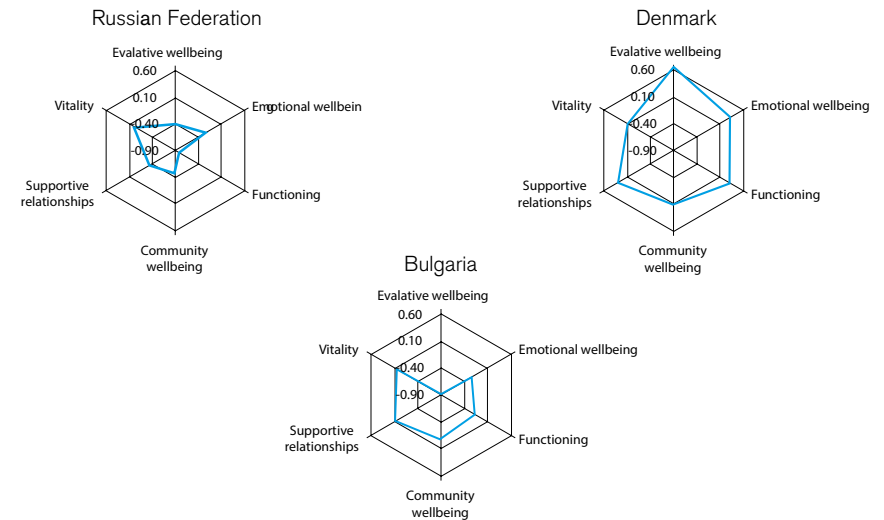
Selected data from Table 2 have been reproduced in radar diagrams in Figure 1, providing country-level snapshots. These snapshots illustrate that where inconsistencies exist between a country's score on the evaluative wellbeing dimension and the other wellbeing dimensions, those patterns of variation are not uniform across countries. For example, the radar diagrams for the Russian Federation, Denmark and Bulgaria reveal quite different patterns in the wellbeing dimensions that those countries rank higher and lower on.

Table 2: Average standardised scores on six wellbeing dimensions, by country

	Evaluative wellbeing	Emotional wellbeing	Functioning	Community wellbeing	Supportive relationships	Vitality
Denmark	0.68	0.36	0.32	0.10	0.30	0.05
Norway	0.53	0.39	0.19	0.23	0.25	0.02
Switzerland	0.52	0.16	0.21	0.14	0.23	0.17
Iceland	0.51	0.28	0.19	0.42	0.19	0.05
Finland	0.51	0.22	0.16	-0.03	0.10	-0.06
Netherlands	0.46	0.20	0.16	0.04	0.16	-0.04
Sweden	0.41	0.24	0.13	0.15	0.22	0.00
Israel	0.31	0.04	0.17	0.03	0.07	0.11
Germany	0.31	0.18	0.18	0.08	0.24	0.10
Belgium	0.26	0.04	0.07	-0.02	0.01	-0.06
United Kingdom	0.23	0.11	0.07	-0.02	0.05	-0.07
Spain	0.16	-0.04	-0.02	0.06	0.07	-0.14
Poland	0.11	0.00	0.10	-0.08	0.09	0.02
Slovenia	0.08	0.27	0.10	-0.01	0.08	0.06
Cyprus	0.07	-0.05	0.07	-0.14	0.16	0.12
Ireland	0.03	0.23	0.12	0.19	0.00	0.09
France	-0.01	-0.01	0.04	-0.06	0.09	0.07
Italy	-0.06	-0.16	-0.01	-0.06	-0.14	-0.06
Slovakia	-0.12	0.03	-0.14	-0.01	-0.15	0.03
Czech Republic	-0.14	-0.01	-0.17	-0.14	-0.24	-0.03
Estonia	-0.17	-0.06	-0.01	-0.08	-0.09	0.06
Kosovo	-0.21	-0.17	0.14	0.16	-0.06	0.07
Portugal	-0.31	-0.07	-0.09	0.01	-0.10	0.15
Lithuania	-0.36	-0.28	-0.17	-0.12	-0.12	-0.12
Albania	-0.38	-0.37	0.01	-0.14	-0.10	-0.05
Russian Federation	-0.40	-0.23	-0.83	-0.45	-0.33	-0.04
Hungary	-0.49	-0.30	-0.14	0.21	-0.16	-0.18
Ukraine	-0.55	-0.23	-0.18	-0.04	-0.25	-0.04
Bulgaria	-0.88	-0.24	-0.17	-0.08	0.06	0.03

Source: European Social Survey Round 6, 2012

Figure 1: Comparison of average standardised scores on six wellbeing dimensions in a sample of countries



Source: European Social Survey Round 6, 2012

Although a country's ranking on the evaluative wellbeing dimension seems to be a moderately good predictor of that country's ranking on the other wellbeing dimensions, the above analysis suggests that some of the dimensions behave differently from one another in several countries, and that ranking on one dimension doesn't necessarily predict ranking on the other dimensions. Therefore, there may be value in approaching wellbeing as a multidimensional concept. One hypothesis postulates that, despite the differences depicted in Table 2, evaluative wellbeing measures offer a good proxy for overall wellbeing because respondents consider its dimensions and summarise them in a single response. Assuming that each of the wellbeing dimensions is of equal weight, one would expect country rankings on evaluative wellbeing to follow a similar pattern to the country rankings in terms of the average scores of the five other dimensions. In Table 3 we test this hypothesis by setting out the differences in ranked position between the two measures. We see that in six of the 29 countries assessed, there is a difference in ranked position of six or greater, suggesting some discrepancy between the measures.

To test whether these discrepancies can be explained by an incorrect assumption that each of the five wellbeing dimensions is of equal weight, we performed sensitivity analysisⁱⁱⁱ to test whether any other combinations of weightings could be used, so that when averaged together, the scores would be as close as possible to the evaluative wellbeing score. When these weightings were applied,^{iv} the two sets of rankings did increase in similarity; however, substantial differences remained. For example, for Ireland and Switzerland the difference in ranked position on the two measures varied by more than five places, and Slovenia's position varied by nine places. This suggests that, while evaluative wellbeing measures appear to be fairly representative of overall wellbeing, they may not represent a summary of all the relevant dimensions. Further research is required to explore whether the concept of wellbeing operates in different ways in different countries; for example, to determine whether different weightings should be applied in different countries, or to ensure that an important dimension of wellbeing in a particular country is not missing from this analysis.

Table 3: Country comparison of average standardised evaluative wellbeing scores with the average standardised scores of the other five dimensions

	Average scores of other 5 dimensions	Difference from evaluative wellbeing rank		Average scores of other 5 dimensions	Difference from evaluative wellbeing rank
Denmark	0.23	-	Ireland	0.12	↓↓↓
Norway	0.21	-	France	0.03	↓
Switzerland	0.18	-	Italy	-0.09	↑↑
Iceland	0.23	↓	Slovakia	-0.05	↑
Finland	0.08	↑↑↑	Czech Republic	-0.12	↑↑
Netherlands	0.10	↑	Estonia	-0.04	-
Sweden	0.15	-	Kosovo	0.03	↓↓↓
Israel	0.08	↑	Portugal	-0.02	↓↓
Germany	0.16	↓↓	Lithuania	-0.16	↑↑
Belgium	0.01	↑↑↑	Albania	-0.13	-
United Kingdom	0.03	↑	Russian Federation	-0.38	↑
Spain	-0.01	↑↑↑	Hungary	-0.11	↓
Poland	0.03	↑	Ukraine	-0.15	-
Slovenia	0.10	↓↓	Bulgaria	-0.08	↓↓↓
Cyprus	0.03	↓			

Difference in ranked position	Higher than evaluative wellbeing	Lower than evaluative wellbeing
<2	-	-
2-3	↑	↓
4-5	↑↑	↓↓
>5	↑↑↑	↓↓↓

Source: European Social Survey Round 6, 2012

Differences in life satisfaction between households with the highest and lowest incomes

Recent years have seen greater concern for economic inequality (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2011; United Nations, 2013; Kersley and Shaheen, 2014). This concern is also relevant for wellbeing. Policy should not just aim to maximise average national wellbeing, but also to reduce inequalities in wellbeing (European Commission, 2013). In 2014 the UK Government’s All Party Parliamentary Group on Wellbeing called for “a national strategy for promoting wellbeing, narrowing wellbeing inequalities and tackling low wellbeing” (Berry, 2014). One way to assess inequalities in wellbeing is to look at the wellbeing of respondents in different income groups, for example the difference in wellbeing between those in the 20% of the

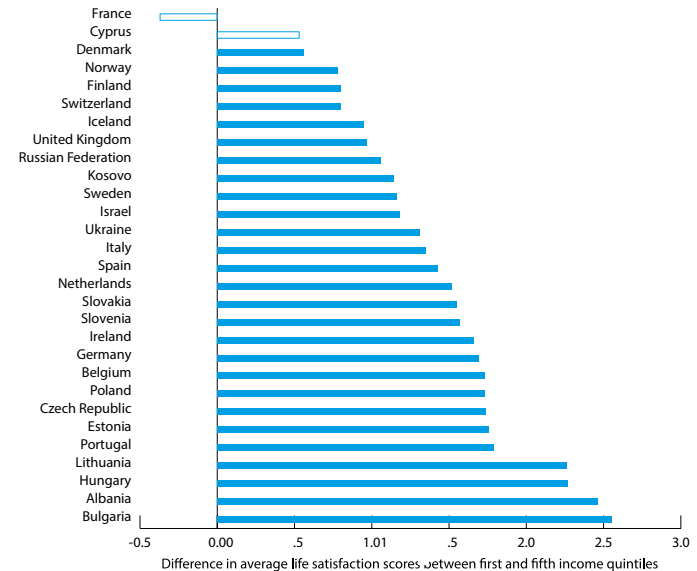
population with the lowest total net household income (the first income quintile), and those in the 20% of the population with the highest total net household income (the fifth income quintile).

We’ve already established that evaluative measures, such as indicators of life satisfaction, seem to be a fairly good, though incomplete indicator of overall wellbeing. However, for ease of interpretation, in the following analysis we use the ESS life satisfaction question which asks: “All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole nowadays? Please answer using this card, where 0 means extremely dissatisfied and 10 means extremely

satisfied.” Figure 2 shows the difference in average life satisfaction scores between the first and fifth income quintiles in each country. Unsurprisingly, in almost all countries, those in the fifth income quintile have significantly higher life satisfaction than those in the first income quintile – the only exceptions are France and Cyprus, where statistically significant differences were not found.^x Interestingly, the size of the difference in average life satisfaction between

the first and fifth income quintiles varies considerably across countries. In Scandinavia, the differences are less than one point on the eleven point response scale, while the majority of countries from South Eastern and Central Eastern Europe show much greater differences. The greatest difference is 2.55 points in Bulgaria. This suggests that equality of wellbeing between the first and fifth income quintiles varies considerably between European countries.

Figure 2: The differences in average life satisfaction between citizens in the first and fifth quintiles for total net household income, by country



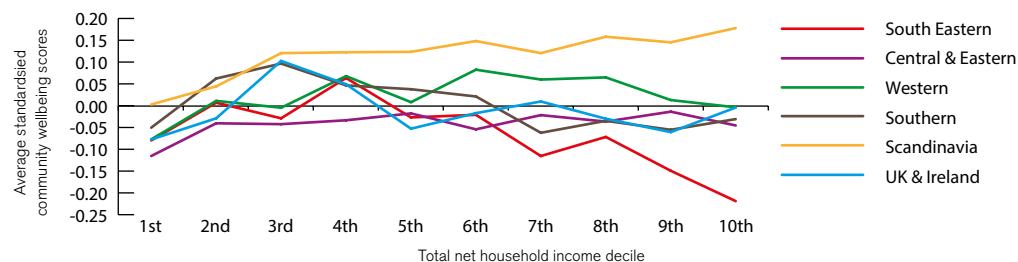
Source: European Social Survey Round 6, 2012

Exploring the relationship between community wellbeing and income

To test whether the inequality in wellbeing between the segments of society with the highest and lowest incomes is also reflected when considering other aspects of wellbeing, here we test whether a similar relationship exists between total net household income and community wellbeing. The community wellbeing dimension has been selected because it is one of the dimensions that our analysis has found to behave most differently from the evaluative wellbeing dimension.

To allow for a more fine-grained analysis which looks at income deciles, we have grouped countries into geographic regions to increase sample sizes.^{xi} Figure 3 shows the average standardised community wellbeing scores for each income decile (total net

household income) by region. A broadly similar trend can be seen in several of the regions, with community wellbeing peaking around the second or third income decile, and then remaining fairly flat or declining slightly as incomes increase. However, we see contradictory trends in Scandinavia and South Eastern Europe. In Scandinavia, community wellbeing increases with income fairly steadily, whilst in South Eastern Europe, community wellbeing peaks around the fourth income decile, before declining fairly steeply as incomes increase. The relationship between income and community wellbeing does not seem to be as consistent across countries as the relationship between income and life satisfaction.

Figure 3: Average standardised community wellbeing scores, by income decile and region

Source: European Social Survey Round 6, 2012

Conclusions

The richness of the ESS module on Personal and Social Wellbeing and the international comparability of the data collected, offer a valuable opportunity to deepen understanding of the concept of wellbeing, as experienced throughout Europe. This booklet presents a sample of key findings from this dataset, on which a much wider range of analyses can be performed. However, even these topline findings suggest a number of tentative implications for practice and policy.

One key finding is that wellbeing seems to be a multidimensional concept. Further, people in different countries do not appear to respond consistently to questions covering different dimensions of wellbeing. Differences may be explained by distinctive cultural, historical and political contexts; however, different policy drivers may also have a particular impact on each of the wellbeing dimensions. Where possible, analysis should attempt to explore how these dimensions respond to wellbeing drivers.

While the finding that households with higher incomes have higher wellbeing than those with lower incomes may sound intuitive, it is notable that the size of the wellbeing gap between high and low income households varies considerably throughout Europe. Policy makers interested in reducing wellbeing inequality, as well as increasing overall wellbeing, may want to focus extra support on households in lower income groups. Further work is required to understand why some countries have higher wellbeing inequality than others, and whether any policy recommendations might emerge from such comparisons. Examination of the extent to which income inequalities correlate with wellbeing inequalities would be interesting, given that

Scandinavian countries, where income inequality is typically quite low, were also found to be amongst the countries with the lowest wellbeing inequalities. The relationship between absolute incomes and wellbeing inequalities would also merit exploration, given the surprising position of Germany in Figure 2, which despite its fairly high average incomes, shows a large wellbeing inequality between those with the highest and lowest household incomes.

No consistent relationship between community wellbeing and income was found at the regional level. This finding suggests that increasing income, or indeed, increasing income equality, is not necessarily an effective approach to improve all aspects of wellbeing. It would be interesting to explore why as incomes increase in South Eastern Europe, community wellbeing falls (as shown in Figure 3). It is also interesting to note that Hungary ranks fairly highly on the community wellbeing dimension, despite ranking much lower on the other five dimensions of wellbeing (as shown in Table 2), despite our finding that scores across the different dimensions tend to broadly reflect one another.

Further investigation around the relative importance of each of the dimensions of wellbeing identified in this booklet would represent a novel and valuable contribution, as well as more detailed analysis of how different segments of the population score in terms of the different dimensions of wellbeing. Further, comparisons using the data collected for the Personal and Social Wellbeing module included in Round 3 of the ESS would also represent a worthwhile study, to assess how patterns of wellbeing may have changed over time.

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End notes

- ⁱ ESS6 -2012 Edition 2.1, released 26 November 2014, see www.europeansocialsurvey.org
- ⁱⁱ Albania, Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Kosovo, Lithuania, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Russian Federation, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Ukraine, United Kingdom
- ⁱⁱⁱ Further methodological information about the European Social Survey is available at www.europeansocialsurvey.org.
- ^{iv} Achieved using standardised translation procedures specified by the ESS Core Scientific Team
- ^v Unless otherwise stated, analyses are based on the full sample of around 54,600 respondents. Post-stratification weights have been applied for country-level analyses and combined post-stratification weights and population weights have been applied for international-level analyses.
- ^{vi} We used principal component analysis (Varimax rotation). This is a technique which can be used to see which sets of questions in a survey correlate most with one another statistically, and therefore form clusters.
- ^{vii} These scores were derived by first calculating a standardised z-score for each question in a dimension. A z-score of zero would represent a value that is equal to the mean, and a score of one or negative one, would represent a distance from the mean of one standard deviation. We then averaged the z-scores for each question with the z-scores for all other questions in the dimension to produce a single, overall standardised score for each dimension.
- ^{viii} Using Microsoft Excel's Sorter
- ^{ix} The optimal weightings were found to be: Emotional wellbeing (2.97), Functioning (0.78), Community wellbeing (0.00), Supportive relationships (0.86) and Vitality (0.00)
- ^x At the p=0.05 threshold (2-tailed) – though France's results were just slightly above this threshold at p=0.054
- ^{xi} **UK & Ireland** includes the United Kingdom and Ireland. **Scandinavia** includes Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden and Iceland. **Southern Europe** includes Cyprus, Portugal, Spain and Italy. **Western Europe** includes Belgium, France, Germany, the Netherlands and Switzerland. **Central & Eastern Europe** includes Estonia, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, Lithuania and the Czech Republic. **South Eastern Europe** includes Bulgaria, Albania and Kosovo. Israel, the Russian Federation and Ukraine did not cluster well within these regions, so have been excluded from this analysis.

About the ESS

The European Social Survey is a biennial survey of social attitudes and behaviour which has been carried out in up to 36 European countries since 2001. Its dataset contains the results of nearly 350,000 completed interviews which are freely accessible. All survey and related documentation produced by the ESS ERIC is freely available to all.

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Supported by the ESRC. The views expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the ESRC nor of the ESS ERIC.

Published by the European Social Survey ERIC, c/o City University London.

June 2015

Design and print by Rapidity

