

# *Intercultural Communication in Europe*



*A Rough Ride*

## **Introduction**

*Talking to fellow Europeans shouldn't really be a problem, right? After all, we have a lot in common: we look more or less alike, we behave more or less the same, we have a shared history of religion, wars, empire building, and so on. And yet...*

*People in Europe are so different that they often find it difficult to get on together, even talk together.*

*This booklet contains examples of the "problems" as experienced by people when meeting other Europeans. They were collected in the PICTURE project:*

*<[www.worldenough.net/picture](http://www.worldenough.net/picture)>.*

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*Three members of the PICTURE project team,  
from Hungary, Cyprus and Bulgaria,  
working in full harmony*

## Intercultural communication

There was this international project meeting, with people from Finland, Bulgaria and Holland. Most of us had not met before. The first contact was at dinner, and the topic of conversation soon became “intercultural communication”. We all delighted in asking one another questions such as: “What do you say in your country when you are late for a movie and have to go to your seat in the middle with all other seats being occupied? Do you turn your bum to the people already sitting there or your front? And do you say something like: ‘Excuse me’? And do you say that to everyone or to two or three people at the same time?” It contributed greatly to the friendly and relaxed atmosphere when we had the real meeting the following day.

*(Reported by a Dutchman)*

## Lunch time

A group of Italian, Hungarian, Polish, German, Spanish and English tourists went to a café in a small Italian town at lunchtime. They were all on their way to catch a bus to visit another town. As the Italians were hungry, they ordered bruschetta and wine; the Spaniards ordered sandwiches and cappuccino. In contrast, the Hungarians and Poles started eating their home-made sandwiches and ordered cappuccino. The Germans did not even get inside to eat their neatly-wrapped sandwiches. Everybody wanted to hurry the Italians. The Italians answered that other countries destroyed their 'eating culture'. The Englishman sat at the table with the others, pulled out a paper and started reading (which shocked everybody). The Poles and Hungarians were very determined, but in the end it was thanks to the Germans only that they managed to catch the bus, as the Germans kept track of the time.

*(Reported by a British man)*

## Complaining

Poles, when asked how they're doing, tend to take the question seriously. They complain quite a lot, about their health problems, for instance - which sounds pretty strange to Englishmen, whose reply to the question "How are you?" is always "Fine, thank you. And how are *you*?". Only when you press an Englishman will he admit that he has just been released from hospital with the message that he has only three months to live and that, when he arrived home, he found his best friend in his own bedroom closet.

*(Reported by a Polish man)*

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Irish people would not say anything if something in a restaurant was not in order; their comment would typically be "Oh well, what can you do?" They seem to be incapable of complaining properly.

*(Reported by a German woman)*

## Openness

I am astonished that people from Denmark can talk about being homosexual so openly. A couple of months ago several students from Copenhagen came to my university, and one of them didn't mind telling other students that she lived with her girlfriend and that they're planning to get married. She claimed it's a regular topic in Denmark.

*(Reported by a Polish man)*



*The world's first homo monument,  
erected in Amsterdam in 1987*

## Hugs and kisses

In Belgium friends and family kiss each other on the cheeks as a greeting (left, right, left). These vary from real kisses to air kisses. In Spain people kiss even more frequently, but usually only twice (left, right). This means that Belgians either end up with their pouted lips in the air, or that they end up giving 4 kisses.

*(Reported by a Belgian woman)*

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French people think that we (Bulgarians) are too 'cold' because we shake hands, instead of exchanging hugs or kisses.

*(Reported by a Bulgarian man)*



*Sometimes people hug trees  
(Picture taken in Estonia)*

## Abrupt

At the end of a conversation in southern Europe they usually round things up very nicely with some pleasant 'formulas' indicating that the conversation is nearly finished. In Germany and Holland they often stop conversations really abruptly. As a Belgian, I am probably a bit in between, but it has happened to me more than once that I find people are not polite or friendly at the end of a conversation in Germany and Holland. As one Dutch woman once said to me when I mentioned this: "You are oversensitive". Afterwards I realized it had to do with conversation habits.

*(Reported by a Belgian woman)*

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Southern European people often say they have the impression that Belgian, Dutch and German people are always angry when they talk: they use a lot of small and short words and are really direct. In Spain and Italy there is a lot of talking 'around' the subject.

*(Reported by an English male student)*

## Cake

A German woman was invited to a birthday party in Denmark. At the party lots of cakes were served - as it is normal in Denmark. The German woman thought that the sandwich cake looked very good so she took a big piece. She didn't understand why all of a sudden it was silent in the room and why everybody else at the party looked at her in a strange way. Later a friend told her that she had not respected the order of choosing the cakes. You are meant to start with the buns, then the cake in the shape of a pretzel, and ending with the sandwich cake as a sort of dessert at the coffee table. At the party nobody had said anything because it would have been very impolite in Danish culture to correct her.

*(Reported by a Danish man)*

## Stirring

A trap you can fall into when visiting Poland is stirring your cup of tea or coffee, or any other beverage for that matter. If you want to come across as a well-mannered person, you have to do it in such a way that there is no clinking noise whatsoever. In other words, you must not hit whatever your drink is in with your spoon. It is a feat difficult to achieve unless you have been 'trained in stirring' from early childhood like all Polish children. What makes it more difficult is that most hot drinks are served in delicate glasses which very easily amplify the sound. Still, it is worth trying if you want to avoid Poles politely turning their heads away from you in order to show that they did not hear anything.

*(Reported by a Polish man)*

## Weddings

Weddings may be one of the favourite conversation topics for many Romanian women. Usually women in different countries are interested in this topic, but in Romania many women seem to particularly enjoy discussing the details of their own or their friends' weddings, even with people they do not know very well. They might even ask you to watch video recordings of wedding ceremonies. There seems to be an overabundance of shops with wedding accessories in Romania.

*(Reported by a Polish woman in Romania)*

## Queuing

A few weeks ago I saw three English people in Leuven (Louvain - Belgium). They went into a bakery shop and were looking for the 'queue'. But people weren't queuing, they stood there in a 'bunch' and everyone knew more or less when it was his or her turn. The English were lost: they kept trying to figure out where the queue was. In the end they left without buying anything.

*(Reported by a Belgian woman)*



*Queuing in England: not as orderly  
as it used to be*

## Espresso

Nowadays you can get a reasonable espresso in just about any EU country. But that's usually a rather weak version of the real thing, I imagine. I shall never forget the espresso I had in Pisa, years ago. I was participating in a small conference and after a fairly copious lunch a number of us (including our Italian hosts) went to this little espresso bar. It was so black and strong! Served in tiny cups, about two thimblefuls and with a glass of cold water beside it, of course. Great! So I ordered another. I still remember the look of horror on the faces of my hosts. "No, don't!", they said in unison, claiming it might be the death of me. Well, I did have another one. I survived. And actually, I think I liked that second one even better!

*(Reported by a Dutchman)*

## Men and women

In a restaurant in Northern Greece my husband and my two sons were given a menu, but I wasn't.

*(Reported by a Flemish Belgian woman)*

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Stereotypes as to men and women seem to differ in various countries. When I (man) am in a restaurant with my female partner, I usually order a beer and an orange juice. Being interested in how waiters act, I make sure not to show what is for whom, observing with interest when they are ready to put the stuff on the table, whether they first ask who the orange juice and the beer is for, or whether they simply assume that the beer is for the man. So far I have not been able to find out whether practice is different in different countries. Whether a waiter does or does not ask seems to be a matter of personality rather than of nationality.

*(Reported by a Dutchman)*

## Table manners

In France I found it quite difficult to eat all the meals with white bread, and quite unacceptable to clean my plate with a piece of bread after finishing my food. Cleaning your plate with a piece of food in Poland is considered bad manners.

*(Reported by a Polish woman)*



*Shared meal: a testcase for  
intercultural communication*

## Shoes

There was this student from a secondary school in Salzburg, Austria, staying with us in Rome, Italy. A very nice girl. Nice except for one thing. When she entered the house, she immediately took off her shoes and walked from room to room in her socks as though it were the most natural thing in the world. Now, as anyone knows (well, anyone born and raised in Italy), socks stink. If you walk through the house in your socks you simply spread germs and odours around. Common sense will tell you that! Well, common sense here in Italy, that is. My mother did everything she could to explain to our guest these very simple things. But our guest didn't speak Italian yet and these ideas did not seem readily understandable to her. My mother bought her slippers, for which she showed great gratitude by putting them and their gift wrapping in her suitcase to take home. And she continued to wander through the house in her smelly socks. When I went to stay with her family in Salzburg I forgot the slippers incident and entered the home with my shoes on and walked about everywhere, just as I do in Rome. Suddenly I noticed that the family were all looking at me in a strange way. For them it was worse to

bring into the house, on the soles of my shoes, the dirt and germs I might have picked up outside, than to walk around the house in my socks, spreading my personal dirt and germs around. From this episode I learned that every culture is happy with its own filth and cannot stand the filth of others.

*(Reported by an Italian male student)*



## First names

I took part in an international meeting lasting three days. We all used English. At the beginning we discussed our “rules of conduct”, deciding among other things to use first names. Two German participants (male, age 55+) who had known one another for years said they were happy to comply, (even though as it turned out later they were not on a first-name basis together). So everyone called them Ulrich and Jürgen, but the two gentlemen themselves, when referring to one another, went to great lengths to avoid having to use those names. So instead of saying “Ulrich is right”, Jürgen would say: “I agree”, or “My neighbour is right”.

*(Reported by a Dutchman)*

## Waiting

I was in a restaurant in Porto together with my colleague Miguel and some of his Portuguese friends. Everybody was enjoying their meal and we were talking. I didn't notice that the other people at the table had finished their first course, and I took my time, quietly and slowly enjoying mine. They waited and waited. Then, when I had finally finished, everybody breathed a sigh of relief and the second course was served. At that time I didn't understand what I had done wrong, but some months later, when Miguel came to my home town, we took him to a restaurant. When he finished his salad a waiter came and took the empty plate away. Miguel said, "Curious, taking the plate away before everybody has finished!" At that moment I understood why everybody present at that first dinner was so tense. All the people at the table had to wait for the last one to finish and only then could they get their second course.

*(Reported by a German woman in Portugal)*

## Invitation

A Swedish colleague told me of one of her first encounters with French culture when she was invited to a private home at 8 p.m. She thought that the invitation included dinner because she had got the impression that French people normally had dinner at 8-10 p.m. At that time she was a student and did not have very much money, so she decided not to eat anything before going out. As she got into her friend's house she got a drink and thought that this was a nice aperitif. However, the drinks were not followed by food but by more drinks so at the end she had a feeling of dizziness and hunger.

*(Reported by a Swedish woman in France)*

## Paying

When I studied in Manchester, a Dutch boy invited a German friend and me to his flat for a home-cooked dinner. I was quite surprised when we were asked to pay a third of the cost of the meal - this would be unthinkable to a Cypriot. After all, we were invited as his guests. I think my German friend treated it as perfectly normal.

*(Reported by a Greek Cypriot woman)*

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## Politeness

In Holland it is customary to say 'Daag', 'Doei', 'Tot ziens', ('Bye', 'See you', 'Cheers') when you've finished your purchase and are about to leave. The shopkeeper will answer in kind. In England you can say 'Goodbye' etc., but more often than not you won't get a reply.

*(Reported by a Dutchman in the UK)*

## Compliments

Portuguese women can say to one another “Estas mais gordinha!” - (literally: “You are a little fatter!”) in a positive sense.

*(Reported by a US expat living in Portugal)*

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My grandma (90 years old) says “You’ve improved”, (Polish: “Poprawilas sie”) when she sees me, which means “you’ve put on weight and you look better now”.

*(Reported by a Polish woman)*

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## Tea

My English friend and his wife were building a house in a small place near Budapest. The builders worked all day and this guy wanted to please the workers with a cup of tea. This would be quite normal in Britain, but it’s just not done in Hungary. Workers don’t drink tea. They drink beer.

*(Reported by a Hungarian man)*

## Decibels

Something a Spanish guy told me. He lived in Belgium but often had to go to Amsterdam because of his job. He said: "When the doors open in Roosendaal (Dutch border) and Dutch people get on the train, the amount of decibels doubles". Afterwards I started paying attention to this and I must say he was right: Dutch people tend to speak louder than Belgians.

*(Reported by a Belgian woman)*

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Italians are not loud. I mean, not usually. You know who are loud? The Greeks!

*(Reported by an Italian man)*

## Serenade

It's very embarrassing, the way these musicians serenade you at your table in some countries when you are having a quiet meal.

*(Reported by an English woman)*



*Serenade in Bulgaria*

## Intimacy in public

I was surprised to be addressed by a middle-aged female bus conductor in Manchester as 'love'. To me that sounded far too familiar and intimate, but it appeared to be normal in that area.

*(Reported by a Dutchman)*

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Portuguese people do not seem to mind or feel embarrassed by young people making out (engaging in heavy petting) on public transportation or in public places.

*(Reported by a Hungarian woman)*

## Silence

Finnish men (and to some extent women, too) feel comfortable with fairly long pauses during a meeting. Whereas I (Dutchman) tend to respond directly after the previous speaker has finished what he wanted to say, Finnish men are content to allow some time for "reflection", allowing a pause of 1, 2 or more seconds to develop. It makes me seem unduly dominant, because if nobody says anything for 1 or 2 seconds, I feel an urge to say something, so as not to let an uncomfortable silence develop. Since I was told about this, I take care not to "take the turn" straight away, but instead count the seconds. After I have counted to 3, I feel I can open my mouth. But it is quite frustrating. Also because Finns take their time to compose a response to the (of course: brilliant :-)) discourse I've just produced, which makes me think that they completely disagree, or disapprove of what I've said, etc. Most disturbing...

*(Reported by a Dutchman)*

## Foreign language

My intercultural incident in France is fairly common, one reported by many tourists who, like me, do not know French. Whenever I stopped a person in the street to ask for directions or the time or just about anything, using English as a lingua franca, my interlocutor would listen carefully, nod to show he understood perfectly, and then respond in... French. I would politely inform my interlocutor, in English, that I didn't know a word of French. And just as politely he or she would express regret... in French. Isn't intercultural communication supposed to be a joint effort?

*(Reported by an Italian female student)*

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I'm trying to learn Dutch (beginner's level), but whenever I speak in Dutch to someone in Holland they immediately recognize my accent and respond in English. I just don't get a chance to practise the language!

*(Reported by an English woman)*

## Meetings

I (Dutchman) regularly chair meetings attended by various people from all over Europe. At the end of a meeting I usually summarize what we have done, what tasks we have set ourselves, etc. But I have learned not to do that when there are many French people present, because they tend to say things like: "That is not necessary. We were all present at the meeting. We know what tasks we have!"

*(Reported by a Dutchman)*

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## Haircut

I went for a haircut in Bulgaria. The lady who gave me the haircut did not speak a single word in any of the languages I knew. Even "yes" and "no" in English were beyond her, which meant that I ran into the perennial problem in that country: Bulgarians shake their heads when they mean "yes" and nod when they mean "no". This had hilarious consequences. When she offered to also cut my eyebrows by holding the scissors in front of them and looking at me with a questioning expression in the mirror, I said "Yes,

please", nodding my head, which resulted in her putting the scissors away. Something similar happened when we tried to negotiate the size of my whiskers and whether or not she should cut my nose hair or put perfume in my hair. We both saw the humour of the situation, and finally came to a perfect understanding: if I said "ok" with thumbs up, that meant "yes", whatever the movement of the head. If I waved my arms in front of me, saying "not ok", it meant "no". Because I had enjoyed the whole 'communicative' situation so much, I left a large tip, which made the lady grab my hand and press a kiss on it. Curious country, Bulgaria...

*(Reported by a Dutchman)*



*These "experiences" were collected in  
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*[www.worldenough.net/picture](http://www.worldenough.net/picture)*

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