

# GUIDELINES SOCHUM



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## **Presentation of the Committee : (SOCHUM)**

Year after year, the General Assembly allocates to its Social, Humanitarian and Cultural Affairs Committee, commonly referred to as the “Third Committee”, agenda items relating to a range of social, humanitarian affairs and human rights issues that affect peoples all over the world.

An important part of the Committee’s work focuses on the examination of human rights questions, including reports of the special procedures of the newly established Human Rights Council. Every year, the Committee will hear and interact with such special rapporteurs, independent experts, and chairpersons of workings groups of the Human Rights Council.

The Committee also discusses the advancement of women, the protection of children, indigenous issues, the treatment of refugees, the promotion of fundamental freedoms through the elimination of racism and racial discrimination, and the promotion of the right to self-determination. The Committee also addresses important social development questions such as issues related to youth, family, ageing, persons with disabilities, crime prevention, criminal justice, and drug control.



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## Topic 1 : How to protect cultural identity while promoting linguistic and religious plurality?

### Introduction

Hook example: The dis-United Kingdom.

The United Kingdom, often presented as a model of liberal tolerance since 1688, constitutes a telling example of a multinational and multi-religious State. Behind a strong symbolic identity, largely embodied by the monarchy, lies a deeply heterogeneous ensemble, bringing together England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. Tensions there are multiple, whether they are political, as revealed by Brexit against Scottish and Northern Irish will, cultural, linguistic, or religious, notably in Ireland. London, cosmopolitan and largely secularized, further accentuates these fractures. The British example thus shows that even an old, stable, and developed State can struggle to reconcile political unity, identity plurality, and the rule of law.

On this first illustration, we must dwell on the terms of the subject to understand the stakes.

Identity refers to a state, something that one is and which is **immutable**, like what is found on our identity card.

Culture, for sociologists and ethologists, is what is **common to a group of individuals**. Culture, however, is instilled in us by several different media: the homeland, family, friends, school, worship, etc., so no two people exist with identical cultures. Yet, in geopolitics, we can speak of cultural areas to talk about **spaces where individuals are considered to have enough in common** to be regarded as having the same culture. The keyword is "enough," because as we can guess, the borders of the same cultural area are extremely **porous**, particularly in places like the United Kingdom, where so many different nationalities are mixed that cultural influences are multiple and blended.

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We must not forget that cultural identity does not only concern individuals in the territory, but those everywhere across the world. The symbol of the quality of German industrial products is what continues to make them sell cars everywhere across the world, and according to the German right wing, sacrificing this ideal is to amputate an economic asset.

Now, plurality is what adds fuel to the fire, because if identity characterizes a movement of **uniformization**, plurality immediately invokes the idea of **difference**. The paradox is therefore palpable upon reading the subject. Plurality can have several sources, endogenous or exogenous.

**Endogenous** first, because cultural plurality can simply be the consequence of the natural development of societies and the exacerbation of power relations in several forms; one cannot prevent working-class, bourgeois, and aristocratic cultures from coexisting without resembling each other in the same territory; This also leads to religious differences, notably the various schisms in the history of Christianity, such as Hussitism in Bohemia, which are expressions of a sort of revolt of the dominated against the dominant.

**Exogenous** second, because cultural plurality can result from the superimposition of one culture onto another. This can happen through **conquest**, for example, the existence of Muslim populations and ethnicities in the former Yugoslavia is the fruit of ancient Ottoman conquests that superimposed Sunni Muslims onto pre-existing Orthodox Christians. Or through **immigration**, like the existence of Spanish-speaking communities in the southern United States superimposing themselves onto pre-existing English speakers. It is important to specify that it is this plurality of exogenous cause that most animates identity debates, as it is characteristic of a more recent cultural mutation.



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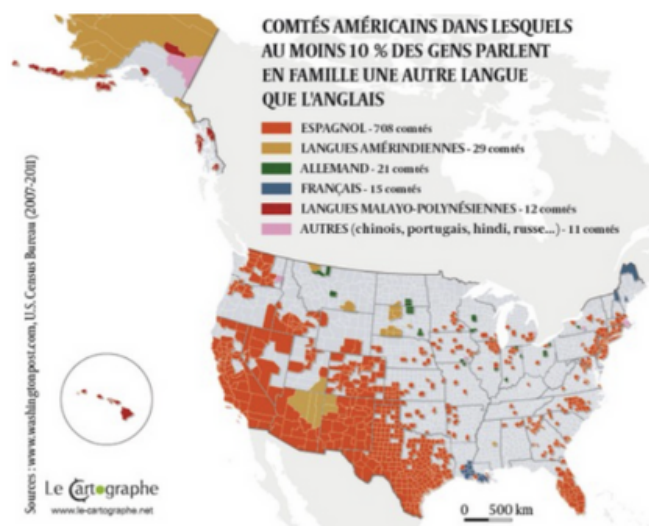
A few words on linguistic and religious aspects. To understand the stakes, one must understand that it is not just a small identity difference; two cultures of different linguistics are two cultures that have very little contact in their history and have therefore formed their entire culture separately; the same applies to religion. Religion has something more in that it is a form of **para-sovereignty**; certain religions produce their own normative systems, likely to enter into symbolic tension with the state legal order, even when the latter remains legally sovereign, as religious law is often seen as an immutable duty.

The idea of this development will be to see the different solutions a State can undertake to settle the problem in question, and each time to specify the implications in the international concert, therefore what must be mentioned in a UN simulation.

## Multiculturalism

Multiculturalism as a sociological fact designates the **coexistence of several cultures** in the same territory, and as a political fact designates the will of a State to create cultural diversity within itself. This is something fairly constant, particularly in Western societies, but it exists in very different degrees. The ideal of multiculturalism is cultures perfectly mixed and integrated with one another, but this is a bit illusory, or it occurs quite rarely. Multiculturalism actually most often results in de facto segregation. Let's explore several examples:

In the United States, it is not rare to see a certain idea of multiculturalism develop, but differently than in Spain. There is an idea in the United States that it is a free land where people of all horizons go in search of success, but the reality is less rosy. 13% of the population is Spanish-speaking, mainly in the south, reaching 38% in New Mexico. Otherwise, the United States has many African-American, indigenous, or recent European-descent minorities (Italians, Irish, Jews...). Nevertheless, US cultural identity is quite rigid, very religious. Ghettoization is a heavy reality in the country, leading to de facto segregation.



To be more precise, Article 27 of the ICCPR stipulates that "In those States in which ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities exist, persons belonging to such minorities shall not be denied the right, in community with the other members of their group, to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practise their own religion, or to use their own language." And more generally, Article 1 of the UN Charter makes mandatory the respect for human rights without distinction as to race, language, or religion. Multiculturalism is therefore not a contemporary whim but an **international norm**.

## Assimilation

The opposite response is undoubtedly that of assimilation. Cultural assimilation is a practice that consists of requiring a foreign person to **adopt the behaviours, customs, and traditions of the majority or dominant population**. In short, here it is the pre-existing cultural identity that **crushes plurality with the weight of its uniqueness**. It is therefore another model of integration, one that finds many historical echoes. Already, a striking example: Emperor Joseph II of Habsburg had implemented brutal "Germanization" reforms to suppress Czech national identity in Bohemia and make them all of German culture, which awakened very strong resistance.

In this type of situation, the UN addresses the problem of protecting minority communities or those not represented by the State. For example, we can speak of Quechua and Shuar, two Latin American languages inherited from Inca peoples, locally called ancestral dialects. These languages were vigorously fought by Spanish colonists who largely caused their locutorship to recede; they attempted, in other words, a policy of assimilation of Amerindians of indigenous extraction into their Spanish-speaking cultural identity.



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Nevertheless, the speakers of these languages asserted their rights on a national scale, in Peru and Ecuador, and internationally, at the UN rostrum. The UN has in fact approved the benefits of the survival of these dialects, noting the Quechua plea that their language has an ecological virtue because it brings man closer to nature. Today, the main UN texts are also translated into Quechua.

Thus, assimilation, by seeking to produce unity through the erasure of differences, often **generates resistance** and calls for the intervention of international law, revealing its own contradictions.

## Secession

Here is the "cheat" solution, that of secession. Secession is the separation of a territory from the power, thus creating its own **independent territory**. We often know the word from the Civil War in the United States, where the Confederate South wanted to separate from the North, which had just declared the abolition of slavery, to perpetuate its slave-holding cultural identity. But how does secession work? In truth, it is always the source, the consequence, and most often both at once, of conflict.

In Yugoslavia, a true powder keg of the Balkans, which includes Catholics, Orthodox, and Sunnis, a myriad of ethnicities and a plethora of languages, there was, at the end of the Cold War, a series of state secessions, all under the watch of the UN. Faced with the failure to constitute a united Yugoslavia, or a "Greater Serbia," the different nations seceded one by one over 10 years. Faced with war and the multiple crimes generated, such as ethnic cleansing, the UN called for an arms embargo in 1991 to avoid excessive violence and occupied zones starting in 1992 with the Vance Plan. The UN recognized Croatia early as a State, while the Croats were still at war for their independence against the Serbian State.

Secessionist claims exist all over the world and are registered by the UN; this is the case for South Ossetia and Abkhazia from Georgia, Ambazonia (English-speaking territory) from Cameroon, or Catalonia from Spain. In itself, the response provided by secession is to preserve a **hard cultural identity**; religious or linguistic plurality also calls for a plurality of States.

## Coercion

We will call coercion a variety of **coercive behaviours** implemented by a State against the linguistic and religious minorities that inhabit it. These means employed to preserve cultural identity can range from more to less extreme, which we will enumerate.

The most extreme is **genocide**. Historically, we have known many genocides, recognized or not. From the Armenian genocide to the genocide of the Tutsis in Rwanda, which saw the intervention of the Blue Helmets, and of course, the Shoah. Geopolitical facts not recognized can in some respects approach it, even currently. This is the case for the Rohingyas (Muslim populations) in Burma, non-Muslim populations by the Sudanese State in Darfur, or Gazans by the Israeli State. These cases are currently being analysed in the International Court of Justice to qualify them as genocide.

Next, we have **expulsion**, of which the emblematic case is the expulsion of Jewish and Muslim populations from Spain by the Crowns of Castile and Aragon after the fall of Granada. But this still exists; the state of Assam in India has expelled 50,000 Bengali-speaking Muslims from its territory for demographic reasons and the protection of national identity. Or the forced displacement of 100,000 Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh between September and October 2023.

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There are also places where linguistic or religious communities are **penned in or segregated** voluntarily by the State. This is still the case in the United States, where Amerindian reservations exist; these are not forced confinements, but spaces inherited from historical penning where unique languages and paganisms subsist, and where living conditions are terrible. This is also the case in the region of Palestine, where the Israeli State forces Muslim or Christian Palestinians to live in specific places like Gaza or the West Bank.

Sometimes, there are cases of **forced conversions**, like the Christian prisoners of war in the hands of the Ottomans at the time of the empire. Today, this rarely takes an official form, but there are numerous occurrences. In Pakistan, hundreds of young Hindu or Christian girls are kidnapped and forcibly converted every year.

This can also take the form of **differences in rights**. That is to say, we attempt to oust religious or linguistic plurality by giving more rights to those who represent the religious or linguistic identity of the country. In Iran, Baha'is (a religious community that believes in a universal spiritual unity) are legally discriminated against; they are excluded from many jobs and universities.

All these coercive means are **authoritarian solutions** to the cultural problem addressed, and which are often highly decried in the global concert; but most often, these exactions regarding international law are discreet and poorly sourced, not allowing for transnational security operations.



## Conclusion

Ultimately, attempts to manage linguistic and religious plurality reveal as much the fragility of identities as the strength of institutions. Multiculturalism, assimilation, secession, or coercion are not just political choices; they are responses to a structural challenge: reconciling human diversity with the imperative of social order. Yet, behind every conflict hides a reality often ignored: the economy. Ghettos, reservations, expulsions, and legal segregation are not only cultural; they protect or seize resources, control markets, and redistribute wealth and power. And this observation joins the second point: the modern nation-state, designed for unity and exclusive sovereignty, struggles to integrate differences without creating artificial hierarchies. Thus, any attempt to preserve a cultural identity leans on both economic power logics and a rigid state model, which makes tension, polarization, and sometimes violence inevitable. Plurality is therefore neither a luxury nor a simple moral challenge, but a structural constraint that no State can ignore, and that no community can abolish without radically transforming its relationship with the world and itself.

## Key players

The current reasoning involves the State above everything else, it's responsible for the policies led towards linguistic and religious minorities. However, international organization do have role in surveillance.

## Key questions

Are there significant minorities in your country? What is your country's philosophy towards the treatment of minorities? What is the essence of your country's cultural identity? Is your cultural identity threatened by plurality, or at the contrary does it benefit from it?

## Topic 2: The right of peoples to self-determination: integrating different ethnicities within the same rule of law

### Introduction

Hook example: The return of Greater Romania?

On January 11, 2026, the President of the Moldovan Republic, Maia Sandu, made a rather unique declaration. Although the head of state of a country, she announced being ready to make it disappear to have it integrate Romania, its neighbouring country. That a State claims another in the name of ethnic unity is common—one can think of the Italian "irredentist" lands in Mussolini's speeches; That a State is ready to separate from a territory because it is ethnically and culturally too different is also seen, particularly during the period of decolonization. But that a State is ready to disappear in the name of ethnic unity with another State, in this case Romania, is as rare as it is revealing. Revealing, indeed, because it proves the triumph of the Romanian ethnic aspect over concrete ideas of sovereignty, which we see well in Sandu's evocations of the era of Greater Romania and the Slavo-Latin identity of the country.

The **right of peoples to self-determination** is a ready-made formula not devoid of history. This right is affirmed in President Wilson's Fourteen Points and in the rules of the League of Nations after the First World War, then is reaffirmed in the United Nations Charter after the Second. It is a right that stems directly from Enlightenment philosophy and became an ideological reflex during the 20th century for the United States and the USSR, who largely imposed it on the rest of the world, particularly colonialist Europe. The problem with this usual formulation is the word "people." **What is fundamentally a people?** The locutorship of a language? Absurd, because an Argentine speaks Spanish like an Equatorial Guinean but shares nothing in common. Common values? It is very vague; France and the United States have institutions inherited from the Enlightenment, yet it would not occur to us to speak of a single people. At the time of the Treaty of Versailles, where this right finds its legal form, the word ethnicity is on everyone's lips; let's study its complexities.

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Ethnicity is a **controversial** term. An ethnic group is a group of individuals who **share characteristics** of civilization, notably (/possibly) language, religion, and culture.

The definition is vague and not unanimous. For many, ethnicity is the sweetened word **heir to the word "race."** Consequently, the word ethnicity becomes quite cataloging and prey to so-called racist clichés. For anthropologists, race has something biological, but ethnicity, which derives from it, adds a cultural aspect, so one could draw different borders for a racial area and an ethnic area. The other term we often bring close is the term **"nation."** In our usual conception of what makes a stable State, we refer a lot to the **nation-state**, which is however a notion that has only been truly lively recently; it is moreover the institution of the right of peoples to self-determination that gives international recognition, assured by law, to the nation-state. At that time, after the First World War, we had a tendency to think that ethnicity and nation were interchangeable terms. More contemporary geopolitical conceptions would give a fairly fine difference, but one that makes one term a sort of theoretical continuity of the other: Ethnicity designates a historical community that has the awareness of being unique and the will to remain so. But unlike the nation, it does not necessarily have a political expression. The nation, on the other hand, is a political organization. If we refer to this, ethnicity is a non-negligible component of the nation, and therefore of our conception—which we will qualify because it is very 20th-century and very Western—of the State.

Finally, the notion of the **rule of law** is crucial because it is the essential condition of the subject. A rule of law is a State that mandates that everyone benefits from **equal protection under the law and prevents the arbitrary use of power by authorities.** The lesson history offers us is that a multiethnic State is always, sooner or later, confronted with problems related precisely to this multiethnicity, like the Austro-Hungarian Empire which exploded during the First World War due to diversity and ethnic claims, and was dissected by the treaties at the end of the war.



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A State is said to be under the rule of law if the different ethnicities are treated exactly the same way. Thus, one cannot say that China is a rule of law, given the treatment reserved for the Uyghurs in the west of the country. Hence the fact that ethnicity brings problems to the notion of the rule of law.

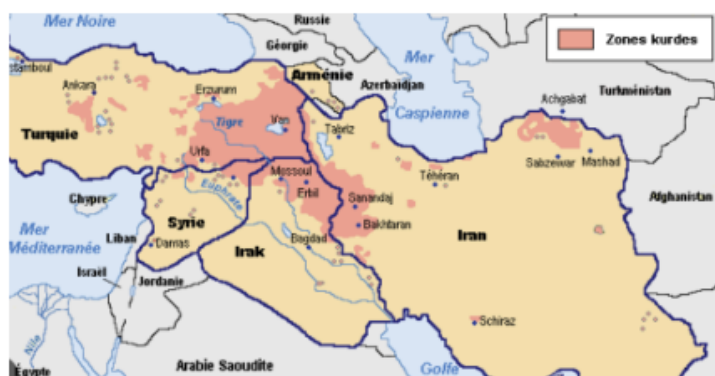
The tension then appears clearer to us than ever: if ethnicity is supposed to be the tangible basis for the constitution and legitimacy of the rule of law, can we really expect the proper functioning of a multiethnic rule of law State?

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## A common difficulty for States faced with multiethnicity

Ethnic plurality constitutes a difficult barrier to cross to constitute a **true national consciousness**. Indeed, the principle of nation is often founded in history; we consider the future with our neighbour because we have lived the past with him (thought taken from What is a Nation, Ernest Renan). Ethnicity represents this well. An ethnic group in the cultural sense consists of people who share a history and traditions in fact. An ethnic group in the biological sense is a genetic correspondence due to concentration in the same environment. It is from these similarities that national consciousnesses are born, namely **the realization of the well-founded and common nature** of a community united under the aegis of a State.

Today, Turkey, Iraq, and Syria have a multiethnic problem. Indeed, nationalist claims are emerging in the Taurus and Zagros mountains—those of the Kurds. The Kurds are an ethnic group over five thousand years old, having always resided in this region and converted to Islam. Up to 48 million Kurds are recorded across the world, and they are considered by international instances as the largest nation without a State. These nationalist claims are found in the PKK, which militates for the recognition of Kurdistan, which would encroach on Syrian, Turkish, and Iraqi territories. The policies of these countries find themselves constrained by this unstable population, which prevents the installation of a suitable rule of law (if indeed that is the goal) integrating them.



Would multiethnicity therefore **abort any national constitution**? It is still a bit early to decide in this sense. States implement a diversity of integrative modes to attempt to integrate ethnic pluralities (see Subject 1), but multiculturalisms sooner or later reveal a form of imbalance, assimilation policies often prove violent, secessions make international law shudder, and coercion makes human dignity shudder.

## Supplanting differences with commonality

To constitute a nation, there must be a **community that has common views**. Ethnicity, as we guess, is something that ties us to our past, whether cultural or genetic. Quite logically therefore, we are right to tell ourselves that no matter our innate differences related to our ethnicity and culture, given that it is the way we conceive the future that will define our life. Ergo, placing common objectives for populations is the way to think beyond ethnic differences. In short, it would be a matter here of supplanting plurality with **common objectives**, because they are what shape the nation. We hear in the United States, before their entry into the Second World War, adages like "we need a good war," in the idea of solidifying the social bond disintegrated by the crisis.

**Religion** also in this sense has a particular role, but its benefits for the rule of law can be nuanced. The State of Israel is quite particular in this sense. While Zionist discourses defend the uniqueness of the Jewish people in fact, it must nevertheless be specified that this is not at all obvious. On the eve of the constitution of the State of Israel, the geographical area covered by Jewish populations was absolutely immense, with very different ethnicities, if only between Sephardim and Ashkenazim. Yet, in Israel, Jewish immigrants are sometimes ethnically very different, but their common Judaism allowed for a relative unity of this people, though very diverse.

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Finally, **ideology** can supplant differences. For Karl Marx, religion is the opium of the peoples (a fallacious tool of influence therefore), and the nation a bourgeois concept. Communism has a very international vocation, because the only reality is that of the class struggle; whether a worker is Belarusian, Ukrainian, Tatar, or Latvian does not matter—he is a worker—hence the creation of the Soviet International in the USSR. Indeed, the way the different Soviet States integrated very important ethnic pluralities throughout the 20th century, through the ideological path, is very impressive in its effectiveness, even if we place nuances (Ukrainians keep the memory of the Holodomor).

In short, there exist a plethora of means to make one forget the problems of ethnic plurality within the same State, even if it is done in more or less imperfect ways. Here we have cited countries in a war economy, confessionalist States, and authoritarian regimes; these experiences show the limits of these mechanisms when they stray from the principles of the rule of law, and in fact, these state entities, as they are, are very unstable, even if ethnic plurality is not the problem.

## State and ethnicity: utopian?

Let's take some perspective now, because there are cyclical elements that have come into play since the Cold War. Globalization is closely tied to our subject; it is the multiplication and intensification of exchange flows on a global scale. Among these exchanges, we notably have **population exchanges**.

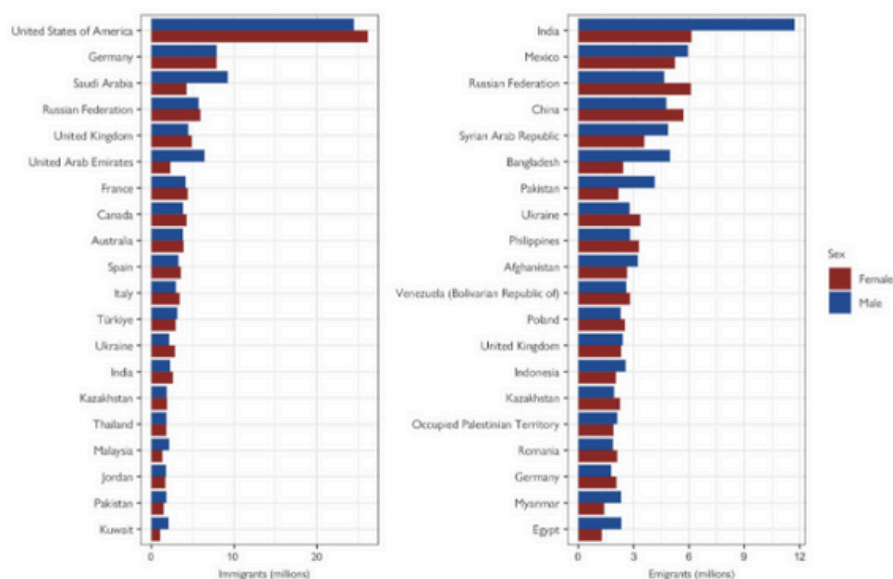
These population exchanges can take several forms—there is expatriation and tourism, of course, which makes individuals more educated about the rest of the world, thus developing a "**cosmopolitan capital**"; in short, one can believe in citizens of the world, who find themselves justified moreover by the laws of the market. The citizen of the world touches on relativism by definition, particularly regarding ethnicity, which becomes less important for him, as well as for others, because the multiplication of economic exchanges makes individuals all over the world draw closer culturally to us (consumer society). Elites are cosmopolitan, and rule of law States are all States open to globalization.

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To justify the importance of globalization, we take the example of the Helsinki Accords, signed in 1975 between the East and West blocs. This pact allowed the opening of the Western market to Soviet populations; many historians see this moment as the victory of the Cold War—indeed, the constitutive ideology of the culture of the inhabitants of the Eastern Bloc was hit head-on by the generosity of the American market which flooded them with products. In the 1980s, it was no more than a façade communism. The globalized market has this unifying factor at very different scales (to be nuanced, of course).

Nonetheless, these population exchanges are also **long-term migrations**, which greatly advances the reflection. Indeed, from then on, **a globalized State is a multiethnic State**. One could even suggest, but more imprudently, that today, a rule of law State is necessarily a globalized State (too strong a protectionism could be considered, relative to the global trend, as an attack on freedom). Therefore, henceforth, because of cyclical factors, a rule of law State is necessarily a multiethnic State. Even if transitions can prove difficult, the welcoming of immigrants into a country can be seen as an indicator of **good democratic health**—a condition, almost, for the rule of law.

Figure 3. International migrants, by sex, top 20 destination countries (left) and origin countries (right) (millions)\*



Source: UN DESA, 2021a.

Note: \* This includes territories.



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Yet is it a nation? and a secondary question: have we not moved beyond the nation-state? It is quite possible that the integration of rule of law States into a globalized world, making borders more porous and ensuring (supposedly) international security and law, constitutes a surpassing of the nation-state. But one could see the problem in the other direction and see the convergence of the interests of individuals of different ethnicities in **common economic interests** as the expression of a supra-ethnic nationality. We will not dwell further on this subject, though very rich.

## Concrete actions of the State

This part will be a bit summarized because many of the possibilities States have to protect the rule of law despite their multiethnicity were already exploited by the first subject. Multiculturalism being a way of founding the rule of law on this plurality, while assimilation stifles plurality in service of a rule of law that gives less into particularism in the name of a more absolute equality. Let's see more, through examples, the way in which institutionally a rule of law State can integrate ethnic plurality.

First of all, we can address the idea of a **centralized State**, which comes with its multiethnic problems. That is where the guarantee of the rule of law is most primordial, because a lack of discernment on multiethnic questions while there is no legal particularism means the mention "rule of law" evaporates. Law must be perfectly egalitarian while being respectful, in theory, of each person's ethnic particularisms, like the practice of religion. But from then on, ethnic particularisms are relegated to the private sphere; to maintain state neutrality, the State must be above all ethnic consideration.

Next, we have the **federation**. "To federate" comes from the Latin foederare, which means "to unite by alliance." The State becomes, in a federation, less absolute; it has a role of international representation, but its actions decline into communities that can self-determine, in accordance with Wilsonian law.

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For States that do not respect the rule of law, the already mentioned principles of forced assimilation, coercion, or the obligation to accept secession are much more common.

## Conclusion

The study of multiethnicity thus reveals less a binary opposition between unity and plurality than a permanent tension between the ideal of the rule of law and the historical, cultural, and geopolitical realities of States. Whether it involves centralized, federal, or intermediate models, the management of ethnic and religious diversity always supposes trade-offs, often imperfect, between abstract equality and recognition of differences. When the State manages to integrate this plurality into a common legal framework, it reinforces its legitimacy; when it denies or instrumentalizes it, it weakens the universality of law. Multiethnicity, and more globally multiculturalism, is therefore neither a panacea nor a threat in itself, but a revealer of the concrete limits of the nation-state. In the era of globalization and economic interdependencies, this question becomes central: political unity can no longer be built sustainably through the erasure of identities, but only through their mastered articulation within the rule of law.

## Key Players

The right of people to self-determination is a treacherous term, while the people is the one that has to make itself heard as a distinct entity, ultimately, the State is always involved. Globally, the State is the one that manoeuvres so that different ethnical entities can feel integrated. If not, it becomes the role of international institutions, such as SOCHUM.

## Key Questions

- Is your country a nation-State?
- Is there a significative ethnical plurality in country?
- To what extent is your country divided?
- Which ethical thinking your State formulates towards the idea of plurality?
- How are minorities treated in your country?

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**sochummunl2026@edhecnationsunies.com**




EDHEC Nations Unies  
24 Avenue Gustave-Delory  
CS 50411  
59057 Roubaix Cedex 1  
France

 [www.edhecnationsunies.com](http://www.edhecnationsunies.com)

 EDHEC Nations Unies

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