Speaking at a mega-rally this weekend, Sarkozy warned that high levels of immigration threatened the European ‘civilisation’ and ‘way of life’. Unless Europe’s borders were tightened, he said, France would withdraw from the Schengen Agreement that guarantees freedom of movement between 26 European countries. He also advocated protectionist EU laws that would force governments to buy goods and services from companies based in Europe.

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France has a long, potent tradition of nationalism. But some find this nationalism hard to square with the growing diversity of French society. Around seven percent of the French population have recent North African heritage, and six million French residents were born abroad.

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This is not just a French issue. Since the 1980s, a stream of immigration has swelled non-European communities throughout the continent. Over 20% of people in Birmingham, England are from Indian, Pakistani or Bangladeshi backgrounds; Berlin has the biggest Turkish population outside Turkey itself. These days 85% of Europe’s annual population growth comes from immigration rather than births.

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Some have welcomed this as a triumph of multiculturalism. But it has also caused alarm, and contributed to the rise of far-right parties like ‘Front National’ in France or the BNP in Britain. Recently the global financial crisis has heightened hostility towards immigration, with resentment fuelled by competition for scarce jobs.

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Sarkozy’s speech shows that he shares some of these concerns. He wants ‘a Europe that protects its citizens’ – an alliance of countries built on shared history and identity. The EU, he argues, was built to serve the interest of European citizens united by a common culture. To preserve that culture, the flood of immigrants must be stopped.

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Critics see this as a dangerous appeal to xenophobic attitudes. The richest cultures, they argue, are born of diversity and intermingling. Inclusiveness and tolerance are the most admirable qualities of European culture – these are the traditions we should honour. Shutting Europe off from the wider world will only lead to stagnation.

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Lors d’un grand rassemblement, Sarkozy a mis en garde contre les forts taux d’immigration qui menacent la “civilisation” et le “mode de vie” européens. Il a déclaré qu’à moins de renforcer les frontières, la France se retirerait de l’Espace Schengen, accord qui garantie la libre circulation entre les 26 pays européens. Il a aussi prôné des lois européennes protectionnistes qui obligeraient les gouvernements à acheter des biens et des services à des entreprises basées en Europe.

La France a une longue tradition nationaliste. Mais certains estiment qu’il est difficile de concilier ce nationalisme avec la diversité croissante de la société française. Environ 7% de la population est d’origine maghrébine et six millions de résidents français sont nés à l’étranger.

Ce problème ne concerne pas seulement la France. Depuis les années 80, une vague d’immigration a gonflé les rangs des communautés non-européennes à travers l’Europe. Plus de 20% des habitants de Birmingham sont d’origine indienne, pakistanaise ou bangladaise. Berlin concentre la plus grande population turque en dehors de la Turquie. Aujourd’hui, 85% de la croissance annuelle de la population en Europe vient de l’immigration et non des naissances.

Pour certains, c’est le triomphe du multiculturalisme. Mais cela a aussi réveillé les craintes et a contribué à l’essor des parties d’extrême-droite comme le “Front National” en France ou le BNP en Grande-Bretagne. De plus, la crise financière mondiale a intensifié l’hostilité vis-à-vis de l’immigration en raison des difficultés à trouver un emploi.

Le discours de Sarkozy montre qu’il partage certaines de ces inquiétudes. Il veut “une Europe qui protège ses citoyens”, une alliance entre les pays basée sur une histoire et une identité communes. Il déclare que l’Union Européenne a été construite pour servir les intérêts des citoyens européens unis par une culture commune. Pour la préserver, le flot d’immigrés doit être freiné.

Ses détracteurs voient dans ses propos un appel dangereux à la xénophobie. Les cultures les plus riches, selon eux, sont nées de la diversité et du mélange. L’intégration et la tolérance sont les qualités les plus nobles de la culture européenne; nous devons honorer ces traditions. Fermer l’Europe au monde ne mènera qu’au marasme de la société.