

V EUROMED YOUNG RESEARCHERS FORUM

16-17 September 2022

Report

Introduction

The background features two large, light gray, curved shapes that resemble thick brushstrokes or abstract lines. One shape is positioned in the upper right quadrant, curving downwards and to the left. The other shape is in the lower left quadrant, curving upwards and to the right. The overall aesthetic is clean and modern.

This year's edition of the Forum was about "Bridging the Gap in Euro-Mediterranean relations: Youth as drivers of Cohesion". The war in Ukraine has incited strong reactions, particularly of Western governments who responded swiftly with measures such as military support to Ukraine, sanctions and humanitarian aid. Analyses of media and social media discourses reveal how the European Union's (EU) response to the conflict has often been met by accusations of double standards, racism and hypocrisy in Middle East and North Africa (MENA) countries. The gap of narratives between both sides of the Mediterranean around the war in Ukraine and the EU response to it has epitomized pre-existing misunderstandings. These analyses also reveal that propaganda and disinformation campaigns play an important role in amplifying certain discourses and influencing public opinion. This challenging context could put a strain

Euro-Mediterranean relations in an increasingly geopolitically volatile region, and deteriorate the Euro-Mediterranean concept, which has already been losing some traction over the past years.

These irritants and misunderstandings between and within both sides of the Mediterranean call for more dialogue. This Forum invited participants to reflect on how young people have perceived the war in Ukraine on both shores of the Mediterranean as well as the responses to the war; analyze misconceptions (which messages are being spread), the actors and platforms involved both in spreading and in combatting disinformation campaigns, and their potential impacts; discuss how narratives can be reconciled; examine the role of youth in fostering more cohesion and putting forward solutions and put forward recommendations to bridge the growing gaps between both shores of the Mediterranean.



Bridging the Gap in Euro-Mediterranean relations: Youth as drivers of Cohesion

Photo by the North-South Centre of the Council of Europe

WORKING SESSION 1

Spotlighting narratives and social cleavages in the Euro-Mediterranean region in 2022

Moderators

Clara Süß

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The huge flow of communications and information has further crystallized existing, and at times, fueled new antagonistic narratives in the Euro-Mediterranean space

In the past couple of years, the COVID-19 pandemic and the war waged by Russia on Ukraine have marked a watershed both in terms of international and regional cooperation and at domestic level within countries. The huge flow of communications and information has further crystallized existing, and at times, fueled new antagonistic narratives in the Euro-Mediterranean space. In light of this, this session aimed to take stock of the disruptive narratives that shaped public opinions and deepened social cleavages in the current context, which has multifaceted and significant impacts on the Mediterranean region. It reflected on the factors threatening social cohesion, peace and reform efforts and subsequently shed light on new priority areas for a more cohesive, inclusive, and peaceful region with young people at its centre. A group of seven young researchers presented their research on related topics.

The first segment of this session focused on attitudes towards the war in Ukraine across the board and included perspectives of different actors of interest in this regard. The online dimension of the topic was the starting point of the discussion, focusing on disinformation, misinformation and inaccuracy in the context of an advancing digital transformation, foreseen by the EU, particularly through the new Agenda for the Mediterranean released in 2021. With respect to this, it proposed a mapping of actors and media content shaping online narratives in order to address outreach and communication shortcomings that the EU faces with regards to its external action, particularly in its Southern Neighbourhood. Part of the discussion also focused on the state level, with a reflection on the means to categorise and understand the reactions of several

Middle-Eastern and North African states vis-à-vis the Ukraine-Russia war and the different variables explaining the choice of governments; another crucial aspect to be considered for the EU to secure cooperation with its southern partners in the current context. At macro-regional level, focusing on African states, the penetration of Russia into African countries' food, security and energy-related issues – among others – is another issue of analysis that researchers suggested to consider in the current context.

The second segment of the session touched upon more sectoral issues in relation to cleavages and conflicting narratives. It offered a closer look at the bottlenecks related to cultural dialogue and diplomacy and how solidified obstacles in this area have further complicated the relations between Mediterranean states. Facing such considerations, the discussion highlighted the potential of climate diplomacy to contribute to young citizens' participation and inclusion while also strengthening the processes of regional integration in the Mediterranean space. Climate change is indeed a challenge that is common to all countries, and this is particularly true for the Mediterranean. As surveys and research have shown, young people are prone to be more sensitive and worried about the issue and, therefore, actors of change. In parallel to this, the discussion looked into society's responses to the subsequent refugee crisis, as the current context and EU solidarity towards Ukrainian refugees have fostered both positive reactions and suspicions of double standards. For instance, it shed light on the different coverage of Syrian refugees and Ukrainian refugees arrivals and the impact of the media on the political mobilisation regarding the conflict in Ukraine.



The third and last segment of the session zoomed in on the role of other international actors in the current context and the perception of Mediterranean and Eastern Mediterranean states towards them. For instance, research shows that countries of the region have diverse positions concerning cooperation with

the EU and the United States (US) as a so-called Western bloc. Although the US and the West seem to lose influence and traction in the region, researchers insist on the need to investigate to what extent support has shifted towards China and, in some instances, to Russia and why this may have occurred.

WORKING SESSION 2

Actors and means to overcome divisions

Moderators

Farah Al-Shami

Research Fellow, Arab Reform Initiative (ARI)

Jusaima Moaid-Azm Peregrina

Doctoral Researcher, University of Granada

Building on the presentations and discussions held in the first working session, this second working session adopted a more forward-looking approach. Young researchers shared their analyses of actors at different level of Mediterranean societies and of the means to effectively counter disruptive narratives and advance towards more cohesive societies. In particular, the role of youths as prominent actors in this context was explored.

In the first segment of the session, the discussion focused on the need for the EU to establish a strategy to debunk influencers' disinformation and hostile narratives, for which the experience in Baltic countries can serve as basis for the purpose of countering Russian disinformation in other places, for example in the Mediterranean. The European External Action Service (EEAS) was thus identified as a priority actor for this purpose, and particularly the East Strat-Com Task Force. Participants discussed the need to safeguard the freedom of press while at the same time ensure that media does not spread hate speech

or discriminatory narratives, as the spill-over from discrimination discourse has been demonstrated when comparing the media coverage of the Ukraine invasion and that of other conflicts and developments related to the Middle East.

The second key segment of this session looked at the role of youth in fostering cohesion in ever more tense and complex societies in the Euro-Mediterranean space. Youths are an essential and growing demographic component of Middle Eastern and North African societies. Nevertheless, they remain, in many cases, at the margins of public life and labour markets in their respective countries. The case of Jordan was presented, illustrating the lack of inclusion of youths in many respects. Young researchers stressed the need for policymakers and institutions, at all levels, to include youth as part of reforms and policies aimed at social protection and to consider youths not only as actors but most importantly as drivers of social cohesion in the Euro-Mediterranean region. For that, their social

Participants underlined the need for the EU to establish a strategy to debunk influencers' disinformation and hostile narratives



capital should be unlocked, valued and built upon. Also looking at the case of Egypt, this session stressed the role of youths in tackling disinformation by youth-led community initiatives, notably in the Delta region. It also highlighted the need to support this kind of initiatives to a larger extent in Egypt and in other countries of the region.

Finally, the last segment of this working session explored concrete youth-centred actions that may contribute to increasing youth civic participation and ensure that the tremendous potential of youths as drivers of social cohesion is secured and strengthened in the years to come. One of the many axes of action that were highlighted is related to social media literacy. Education, training and particularly increasing the media literacy of youths, particularly below the age of 18 is of utmost priority. In that regard, any initiative aimed at enhancing such capacities should involve different

actors, including national, regional, local authorities, EU representatives and civil society organisations. Another key aspect on which further effort should be focused is the potential of online deliberation to improve youth participation in the Euro-Mediterranean region. Young people's active participation in policy and decision making processes is on the list of priorities of the EU and of the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM). Nevertheless, disadvantaged youths often remain excluded from representation and participation in such processes, which calls for alternatives. In that matter, new inclusive participatory and deliberative practices hold significant potential in order to secure youth citizenship and ownership. New digital technologies and tools can help move towards more intercultural dialogue and participatory processes involving youth provided that the challenges posed by such new tools are addressed.

Online deliberation could improve youth participation in the Euro-Mediterranean region

PRACTITIONERS SESSION

Euro-Mediterranean Strategic Communication

Speaker

Luis Miguel Bueno Padilla

EU Regional Media Officer – Spokesperson in
Arabic for the MENA Region, European External
Action Service

The fight against disinformation – identified as a key priority of the digital transition as stated in its new Agenda for the Mediterranean – is very much linked to the safeguard of values of democracy, peace and fundamental rights

Disinformation is a rampant issue all across the Euro-Mediterranean region, as in other parts of the world, which has gained further traction through the COVID-19 crisis and the war in Ukraine. The EU, both internally and in its external relations, strives to fight disinformation effectively. With regards to the EU's Southern Neighbourhood in particular, the fight against disinformation – identified as a key priority of the digital transition as stated in its new Agenda for the Mediterranean – is very much linked to the safeguard of values of democracy, peace and fundamental rights.

This session offered a space for dialogue between the group of young researchers and Mr. Luis Miguel Bueno Padilla, a Spanish career diplomat and the EU Spokesperson in Arabic for the MENA region. Mr. Bueno Padilla is the first to hold this position, which opened in 2021. The speaker engaged in a discussion on the issues related to EU's efforts to tackle disinformation and maintain the position of the EU as a

reliable partner in an increasingly complex context where competition between global actors in the MENA region has intensified with the invasion of Ukraine by Russia. In this context, despite the EU's significant and fast response to the invasion, many accusations of double standards have been relayed in MENA media outlets and on social media concerning the EU, thus negatively impacting trust vis-à-vis the EU in the region. In such a context, communication plays a very strategic role in the region, and researchers stressed the importance for the EU to communicate not only in Arabic but also using the terms that populations in the MENA region understand.

Researchers highlighted that this hostile reaction of MENA societies towards the EU is to a certain extent due to the fact, for decades, the EU has been amalgamated with the United States of America (US) as "the West", which eclipses the real divisions and diversity which exist inside the EU, even with





regards to the current situation in Ukraine. They indicated that the EU has not positioned itself well enough in the region in the past two decades, which left plenty of space for the spread of disinformation and anti-EU narratives. Despite the EU's efforts to maintain influence in the region, it suffers from the colonial biases which are often hard to grasp but which may remain rampant in the backdrop of many foreign policy stances. Researchers thus stressed the need for the EU to openly engage in a self-reflexive exercise and this effort of communication has to be done not only as an EU level but also at member state level.

To answer the question raised by Mr. Bueno Padilla about why Ukraine is so important, researchers acknowledge the fact that the Syrian conflict was of a different nature, more because of

political schisms, than the conflict in Ukraine, which threatens to expand, directly unbalance Europe and change geopolitics across the globe.

The discussion also stressed that the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) is particularly challenged in the current context, since safeguarding an approach based on values and human rights has to be done at the same time as safeguarding energy security, good relations and stability in a region where autocratic regimes have managed to maintain themselves.

In this context and taking into consideration the challenges posed by the war in Ukraine for EU's strategic communication, researchers agreed that the recent appointment of a spokesperson in Arabic in the MENA region is an initiative that is welcome.

Safeguarding an approach based on values and human rights has to be done at the same time as safeguarding energy security, good relations and stability in a region

POLICY TALKS

The Role of Youth in Shaping Public Policy

Speaker

Josep Ferré

Executive Director,

Anna Lindh Foundation



Youth is an essential pillar in any policy or initiative aimed at strengthening cohesion. In the Euro-Mediterranean region, youths are essential to civic life but oftentimes lack opportunities, both in the labour markets and in policy-making spheres. In face of new current challenges, awareness about the role of youth has grown significantly, as shown by the recent release of the EU's Youth Action Plan in October 2022.

Mr. Josep Ferré, Executive Director of the Anna Lindh Foundation, participated in an exchange with young researchers about intercultural dialogue and the role of youth in shaping public policy in the Euro-Mediterranean space. Many researchers expressed the necessity to have more youth participation in policy making processes and that youths should not only be considered as interlocutors in discussions centred on youth but rather as an interlocutor worth considering in any kind of policy areas. It was noted that youths should not have to prove their legitimacy in

participating in policy-oriented dialogue as they are an essential part of societies.

Researchers also stressed that intercultural dialogue in the Euro-Mediterranean region should take into account the many barriers which may impede youth participation, notably the use of language. They pointed at the need to create spaces of dialogue that involve the use of other languages than English, which requires more efforts, both financially and in terms of human resources. Another challenge that researchers identified concerning intercultural dialogue in the region is the significant regional disintegration. In that respect, the use of "Euro-Mediterranean" rather than "Mediterranean" may widen the already existing gaps between the societies and youths of both shores. Thinking of a Mediterranean space incites more reciprocal interest in intercultural dialogue from both shores and may reduce asymmetrical relations that are already visible.

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