

Report of the ALF-UNIMED module

Euro-Mediterranean intercultural Trends

A learning journey through the Anna Lindh Report

“Intercultural Trend and Social Change in the Euro-Mediterranean region”

Module 1: Representation of the Mediterranean and Mutual Interest

By Simone Hanrath , Peter Corkery and Pierre Bouhier-Mayeur

Introduction

Module one of the Anna Lindh Foundation-UNIMED jointly delivered course “Euro-Mediterranean Intercultural Trends” launches the discussion of results collected in a 2018 public opinion survey of European and Southern and Eastern Mediterranean representative populations. More specifically, this first module introduces us to the survey’s results on common values and attitudes, interests and expectations in the Euro-Mediterranean region. What are the shared interests and values of the Euro-Mediterraneans? What conclusions can we draw from the answers of survey respondents? What are the real opinions of those living in the region? How can we use this survey’s results to better comprehend the critical issues faced by the region’s residents? These are the questions this module seeks to answer.

After presenting the relevant survey result the module moves into some scholarly analysis to try and answer the above questions. Often the responses challenge some common perception about public opinion in the region and this discussion bears fruit in a better understanding of why this is and how it’s changing.

The module is divided into four units each of which tackles specific survey questions and their responses often dividing by country or age demographic. Unit one focuses on survey results as they pertain to commonalities and divergences. Unit two looks at preferred country to live in and provides insight into migration patterns. Unit three talks about perceptions on both shores of the Mediterranean of those living on the opposite shore and their level of interest in knowing more about the other. Finally, unit four reviews the possible societal gains of increased interaction.

Each unit builds on the discussion of the previous and through presentation of the survey results paired with scholarly commentary a picture of Euro-Mediterranean public opinion emerges. The end result; a rather more hopeful picture of how residents see each other than that typically portrayed in the media.

Unit 1 - The representation of the Mediterranean

Pierre Bouhier-Mayeur

The first Unit is dedicated to the representation of the Euro-Mediterranean region. We will present the article by Mohamed TOZY, "*Mediterranean, between the feasible and the desired*", which analyses the data from the survey. We will explain the main ideas and trends that emerge from it, in particular about common or different points of view.

Mohamed Tozy first highlights a paradox: despite an increase in violence and tensions since the previous study, the region is largely associated with positive elements by the respondents. Indeed, a majority of people characterize the Mediterranean area by positive values: hospitality, food and lifestyle. However, the region is at the same time associated with unrest and insecurity. This is the paradox. The second key element is the importance of mobility within the Euro-Mediterranean area. The huge figures for migration, generally from the South, should be put into perspective. According to Mohamed Tozy, the huge migration flow is the result of tragic but punctuated events, and not a structural trend. Inter-Mediterranean mobility remains important in any case. Even if the majority of exchanges between the South and the North are limited and superficial, especially for tourism and business, the author insists on the fact that migration is more undergone than desired.

The third point on which Mohamed Tozy insists is that of values. Unsurprisingly, there is a dichotomy between progressive values (curiosity, independence, respect for diversity) and conservative values (religion, obedience) which partly corresponds to the border between the North, characterized by the search for independence, and the South, which is more marked by religious practice. However, we should not caricature the reality. The author underlines that some countries on both sides of the Mediterranean go against the conventional wisdom.

Finally, Mohamed Tozy is particularly interested in the recognition of the role of women in euro-mediterranean society. He notes that while all countries recognize the importance of women in economic, social and cultural life, the southern Mediterranean countries are more reluctant to grant them a political role.

To conclude on this first unit, it is interesting to see that the perception of the Euro-Mediterranean area is sometimes surprising, sometimes not. Beyond the stereotypes, this shows the complexity of the regional reality.

Unit 2 - A new life in a new country

Peter Corkery

This unit centres around the responses to one survey question in particular; If you could start a new life, in which country of the world would you start it? The unit analyzes the responses by country, by European respondents and Southern and Eastern Mediterranean respondents and by age group. What are the perceptions of Euro-Med residents and what are their preferences for places to live?

Southern and Eastern Mediterranean (SEM) respondents were more likely to want to start a new life in their home country with sixty percent choosing their home country as their first choice. European respondents were more likely to want to start a new life elsewhere with thirty six percent choosing their own country.

Ayman Zohry Ph.D. an Expert on Migration Studies at the Egyptian Society for Migration Studies comments on the survey result, noting that survey respondents counter a common media narrative that most SEM residents would like to leave their country in order to live somewhere else. He highlights that the two countries with the highest percentage of residents who would begin again in their home country are Israel (66%) and Algeria (65%) and the country with the lowest percentage is The Netherlands with twelve percent. He also notes that when we break down the responses according to age and sex we see that women respondents were more likely than men to wish to restart life in a new country and that younger respondents were also more likely to choose a different country. Lastly, employment status and type seems to predict opinion with more unemployed respondents more likely to choose life in a new country and self employed respondents least likely to choose a country other than their home country. Zohry believes that these results can help us understand the real dynamics at play and challenge persistent narratives on migration that may not accurately describe real sentiment of residents in the region.

Supplementing the commentary by Ayman Zohry, Bernard Abrignani, Deputy Director of the National Erasmus Program Agency, calls attention to the survey's implications for how we see youth engagement as a driver of peaceful interaction and cultural mixing. He notes that survey respondents from all over the region placed Language barriers, Cultural barriers and Stereotypes at the top of their list of barriers to cross cultural encounters. He also notes that eighty percent of respondents consider youth exchanges and educational programs as the most effective way to counter radicalization and conflict. Abrignani believes that the survey provides support and should further energize initiatives to create youth exchanges that facilitate physical interaction between different states and cultures in the region.

Unit two focuses on survey results that help us understand preference for places to live and work in the region and Ayman Zohry's commentary clarifies exactly what this means for migration. Abrignani then describes how the dynamics of migration could be affected by youth interaction and education. On the whole we are left with a clearer picture of the situation in the region regarding migration and public opinion on movement.

Unit 4 - Euro-Mediterranean cooperation

Pierre Bouhier-Mayeur

In this fourth and final unit, we will look at how cooperation between the two parts of the Mediterranean can lead to positive societal gains. The majority of respondents from both groups of countries reaffirmed, as in previous surveys, their strong belief that enhanced cooperation would lead to positive societal gains. Respondents consider that cooperation can create new opportunities for education and training; and for entrepreneurship, innovation and youth employment.

Let's look at the analysis of Abdelrahman Aldaqqah in the article "*Youth as a smart investment towards a stable Mediterranean region*", which focuses on the situation of young people in the Euro-Mediterranean area.

The author proposes to invest massively in youth to curb radicalization, by promoting intercultural dialogue. He first shows that if 55% of young people in the SEM area describe cultural and religious diversity as a threat to the stability of society, it is mainly because of poor management of this diversity, which has led to tensions. But young people are much more optimistic than their elders. Indeed, three quarters of young people in the region as a whole consider cultural and religious diversity to be an asset for society. They are almost all in favour of full equality of rights and opportunities between the different communities.

According to the author, diversity is a means to achieve peace, but only if we have the means to do so. To this end, he stresses the importance of integrating young people into society. Because there is a real demand from young people to intervene in political, economic and social debates. This requires real quality education, youth programmes and the development and support of youth citizenship incentives.

Engaging young people as a positive force for change and strengthening young people's civic engagement and participation in decision-making, is the best way to foster intercultural interaction and peace-building. This recognition and support for young people makes the principles of coexistence and tolerance a reality. The author highlights two successful projects: the "Slotervaart" project in the Netherlands, and the "Young Mediterranean Voices" offered by the British Council throughout the region.

Finally, the author analyses the dialogues and exchanges between the two sides of the sea. Interactions between the communities are still strongly enabled by social networks and the Internet on the one hand, and by the school on the other one. According to the survey, the difficulties of exchange are more due to the language barrier and stereotypes, than to material problems such as obtaining a visa. The desire to migrate is higher among young people, especially those from SEM countries, due to political and economic considerations.

To conclude with this final Unit, we see that we can be optimistic. The youth of the SEM region is eager for dialogue and exchange. All of them see Euro-Mediterranean cooperation as a way to benefit from the cultural diversity in the region. Therefore, the author calls for the strengthening of regional cultural policies in favour of youth, in order to promote dialogue and peace in the Euro-Mediterranean area.

Conclusion

Module one shapes our understanding of the Euro-Mediterranean in new ways giving us new insights into how residents in the region perceive the region, their home countries, and residents on the opposite shore; an understanding that will serve as the foundation for further learning in modules two through four. The Euro-Mediterranean region is seen by residents to be best represented by hospitality, food, and specific lifestyle. On the other hand many residents also see the region as characterized by unrest and insecurity. Nonetheless, the module points out that there is room for enthusiasm as most residents have a positive attitude towards the other shore. Perhaps the most important takeaway from this unit is that all survey respondents believe that more youth engagement and interaction would yield positive gains for the region. This significant convergence of interests provide fertile grounds for future cooperation.