

QUO VADIS  **S**

**CIVIL
SOCIETY**  

IN EUROPE'S

**NEIGHBOUR-
HOODS?** 

Quo Vadis Civil Society in Europe's Neighbourhoods?

Edited by

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Content

Introduction: Quo Vadis Civil Society in Europe’s Neighbourhoods? Nadiia Bureiko and Dimitrios Triantaphyllou	4
CSOs and the COVID-19 Pandemic Cristina Rigman.....	8
Youth Empowerment in Europe’s Neighbourhoods: Challenges and Prospects in the Post-COVID-19 era Michael G. Kavuklis.....	16
Gender Dynamics Agapi Kandyaki	32
Intercultural Dialogue and Civil Society: a Policy, a Practice, a Tool Stefanos Vallianatos.....	42
The SDGs and Cities from the Black Sea Region: Exploring Macro- Challenges Limiting a More Sustained Engagement Stefan Cibian	52
Concluding Remarks Nadiia Bureiko and Dimitrios Triantaphyllou	64
About the Contributors.....	67
About the Partners and the Donors	69

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Intercultural Dialogue and Civil Society:

a Policy, a Practice, a Tool

The Mediterranean basin, historically, has been a crossroads of cultures and civilisations, as well as a theatre of operations and confrontation between major powers and empires. This has implied an interaction, be it of military, commercial, or human nature. From a different perspective, the Mediterranean Sea has also been perceived as a frontier, one that divides the Western (European) world from that of the Arab and Islamic one, whereas the nation-state framework has further exacerbated divisions between the societies in the region. With regard to the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood, a political and ideological divide re-enforced a similar condition, notwithstanding cultural differences.

The rise of the EU's prominence and the post-Cold war emerging framework, on the one hand, and the regional and domestic dynamics and developments in its Southern and Eastern Neighbourhood on the other, have established a new reality where the countries of the European Union re-emerged as the preferred migration destination from the Southern and Eastern Neighbourhood, and from the Mediterranean countries, including Sub-Saharan Africa and other parts of the Middle East and Eastern Asia. This could be attributed not only to the EU's geographic proximity but also to its political and social charm; i.e., economic prosperity and well-developed institutions and practices of liberal democracy, including those of human rights. Meanwhile, the countries of the E.U., in order to maintain their high living standards, also due to their low birth rate and, therefore, ageing population, have been in dire need of 'new blood', provided by immigration, especially (yet not exclusively) by skilled youth. Meanwhile, the emerging expansion of the EU's policies and interests, including globalisation per se, has immensely increased the interaction and relations between the EU and its neighbours, at all levels and domains, including the virtual space.

Hence, the co-existence with the 'other', i.e. the non-Western European in origin, does not take place any more only within the Western European societal fabric (the outcome of migration), but also in parallel to it, away and in the in between space: the implementation of exchange and co-executed programmes and activities, the attractiveness of the educational opportunities and studies that Western European institutions provide, but also in cyber space, as a community and a communication domain, all of this established an interaction different in nature and scope, and usually, a non-permanent presence within the E.U. of these populaces.

Yet, such relationships, developed through traditional means (and other EU policy tools, like, initially the Euro-Arab Dialogue, the Mediterranean and the Renewed Mediterranean Policy, but also the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership¹⁰, although the latter did lay the foundations for a new focus), whose emphasis tended to be on the political, security, economic and commercial

¹⁰ European Commission, 'Strengthening the Mediterranean Policy of the European Union: Establishing a Euro-Mediterranean Partnership', supplement 2/95 to the Bulletin of the European Union, Luxembourg, EC, 1995.

domain, proved insufficient to treat the new challenges that emerged¹¹ and to build bridges that would allow a more sustainable and peaceful coexistence, based on an understanding of each other and accepting diversity as a creative force rather than an abnormality. Historically overburdened, Euro-Mediterranean rapprochement had to face new challenges and threats, including Islamophobia, anti-Semitism, and xenophobia in general, radicalisation, and other forms of extremism, as well as pressing human rights failures, poor democratic performance, etc. Against this backdrop, there was a need for a new approach that would complement the existing mechanisms and would be applied through culture and civil society.

Key notions, pillars and actors

While culture as the domain of a specific ministry applying relevant policies is more domestically oriented, it has also served as a bridge between states. Therefore, culture is a part of the diplomatic practice. Considering this, the key notions related to culture in the diplomatic domain, i.e., public and cultural diplomacy, and cultural relations, are instrumental as far as intercultural dialogue is concerned. The EU National Institutes for Culture (EUNIC, an independent initiative, established to collectively coordinate and enhance the activities of the national cultural institutions of, primarily, the E.U. member states worldwide), which advocates for a prominent role of culture in international relations,¹² defines public diplomacy as the process ‘whereby a country seeks to build trust and understanding by engaging with a broader foreign public beyond the governmental relations that, customarily, have been the focus of diplomatic effort’. Concurrently, cultural diplomacy is understood as one of the instruments that public diplomacy agents use to communicate with other states and their agencies and publics through cultural means, in the pursuit of their foreign policy objectives. Finally, cultural relations (a broader practice which EUNIC considers as its main focus), is ‘an umbrella term referring to the fostering of understanding between countries and especially their peoples’. In the case of cultural relations, agents and practitioners engage in dialogue with a much broader public, in a more dynamic way, hence, seeking to create partnerships between people either via specific government or cultural institute policies or without any government intervention.

Cultural institutions could either complement or sometimes even replace members of the diplomatic corps in practising cultural diplomacy. Yet, these institutions’ perception of their own roles has evolved – often they tend to perceive themselves more as practising cultural relations rather than being agents of cultural diplomacy. At the European level, the EU National Institutes for Culture could be one of the most advanced manifestations of this approach. EUNIC is the European network of organisations engaging in cultural relations, initiated by

¹¹ For an evaluation of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, see, for instance: Calleya, Stephen C. 2005. *Evaluating Euro-Mediterranean Relations*. London: Routledge.

¹² But also, ‘a strategic partner of the EU, actively involved in the further definition of European cultural policy’, <https://www.eunicglobal.eu/about>

the European cultural institutes, including the Goethe-Institut and the British Council, to coordinate their actions and collectively promote European ideas and values (Vallianatos 2021, forthcoming).

The notion of culture per se is much wider and has a cross-cutting overarching approach. This notion covers not only arts and letters but other activities as well, like tourism, education, research, creative industries, heritage at large, new technologies, and artisanship, as well as development, and, most importantly, values and principles. In a nutshell, culture includes all human and non-commercial (narrowly defined) activities and interactions and offers a fundamentally neutral space, that minimises probable tensions and maximises creative interaction. In fact, one could argue that culture is an open system, which can only flourish and evolve through interaction, only to be artificially framed by state policies and borders, with the focus being on the societal and human environment.

The domain of culture, in the absence of dialogue (or even relations), has also been an area of competition, among (primarily) states but also other groups, whereas the understanding and interpretation of certain notions may vary. In that respect, cultural relations usually imply a positive interaction and are practised by a variety of social and state actors, hence, can exhibit a satisfactory degree of the societal outreach. Yet, cultural relations tend to imply an inter-state dimension, contrary to the notion of (intercultural) dialogue, which offers a more dynamic and therefore useful approach:

1. in terms of the related entities and groups, it has a much wider relevance, reference, beyond the state division, to cover domestic reference;
2. it is perceived to take place between equal entities;
3. it is a continuous and evolving process, which includes different stages, i.e. acknowledgment of the 'other', tolerance, understanding, and acceptance;
4. the (desired) end result, the outcome, is a dynamic one, where both sides (should) move away from their initial position and get closer to each other.

Overall, civil society is arguably an institution that can effectively practise an intercultural dialogue to deal with the identified challenges. In fact, civil society has been outlined by the EU and other major global actors, like the OECD and the Council of Europe,¹³ as a suitable and effective mechanism to promote democratisation in the Middle East, Eastern Europe and the Balkans, to monitor good governance, the state of human rights and other civic rights

¹³ In fact, Article 15 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU, recognises civil society's role in the EU's good governance, and Article 11 of the Treaty on EU stresses the need for the EU 'to have an open, transparent and regular dialogue with civil society organisations', when preparing proposals for EU laws. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/summary/glossary/civil_society_organisation.html

in functioning democracies, but also as a crucial partner for development cooperation.¹⁴ Meanwhile, cooperation with local CSOs is included and encouraged in the agenda of the leading cultural organisations and several EU Commission Directorates.¹⁵ The closer cooperation with CSOs, however, does not exclude the institutional agents endorsing cultural relations, relevant state institutions or traditional diplomatic corps. On the contrary, a collective approach is essential to maximise the effectiveness and sustainability of cultural dialogue, especially when such a volatile and dynamic region is concerned. Albeit the significance of all the involved actors, their profile, and the activism and capabilities of civil society, provide them with an advantageous position to perform a leading role. First, the voluntary, associative action of CSOs is in the service of the common good, sharing values and behavioural codes of respecting each other's right to operate (Niblock 2005, 487); and they enjoy autonomy vis-à-vis the state and the market, while they do (or should) cooperate productively with all other societal segments. Second, civil society includes a wide variety of formal and informal organisations, covering almost all aspects of civic life, hence exhibiting (collectively) a very extensive societal and communal outreach. In addition, they have acquired specialised knowledge and skills, including innovative thinking and behaviour, in performing their multi-faceted role, including performing advocacy and monitoring activities and providing social services. Third, CSOs are generally active in networking, not only in the domestic arena but globally as well. Hence, their real power is not so much in their individuality (although some may carry the weight to have an impact through their actions), but in their collective action (Vallianatos 2017).

Intercultural dialogue 'on the ground'

The initial stimulus for introducing intercultural dialogue as a mechanism and approach by the EU was grounded in the challenge to deal with the multi-cultural fabric of most European societies and to integrate the growing and diverse immigrant communities. Therefore, introduction of 'inter-culturality' was an evolutionary step that has strengthened the multicultural approach – thus, altering the perception of diverse entities living in parallel universes and simply tolerating each other, towards a more dynamic condition where such entities not only co-exist in the same space, but also interact creatively. To this end, cultural diversity is perceived as an asset, a source of innovation and creativity. Therefore, the EU, in conjunction with the Council of Europe, perceived intercultural dialogue as an appropriate tool to deal with this 'integration' – a long way from the assimilation – of immigrants, which would also contribute to social cohesion (Council of Europe 2008). This approach was practically implemented via the Council of Europe's Intercultural Cities programme.

¹⁴ See Busan for Effective Development Cooperation, further emphasised in the first high-level meeting of the Global partnership for effective development cooperation, held in Mexico in April 2014, <https://www.oecd.org/development/effectiveness/busanpartnership.htm> and <https://www.effectivecooperation.org/>

¹⁵ See, for instance, the EUNIC call for action 'European Spaces of Culture', its principles and required partners, <https://www.eunicglobal.eu/european-spaces-of-culture>

This programme identifies the urban framework as the appropriate space for integration, with the municipalities and civil society organisations as the key stakeholders embracing cultural pluralism, empowering all members of the local communities to interact, promoting participation and co-creation, and involving everyone in the decision-making process and power-sharing in urban institutions.¹⁶

Accordingly, in the EU's policies, Intercultural Dialogue as a process and a tool emerged primarily within the framework of the Euro-Med Partnership, where the third basket (social, cultural and human) made explicit reference to intercultural dialogue 'particularly through an emphasis on shared culture between the northern and southern shores of the Mediterranean' (Abbott 2018). Ten years after the Barcelona Process, the Anna Lindh Foundation (ALF) was established as an intergovernmental institution dedicated to intercultural dialogue between the two sides of the Mediterranean via the interaction of the relevant CSOs. This recognised the importance of structured dialogue and the fundamental role culture plays, to achieve a sustainable partnership in the Mediterranean.

A fundamental pillar of Intercultural Dialogue, as a process, is that it recognises the plurality and fluid nature of contemporary societies in the region. Moreover, the acceptance of diversity as characteristic of those contemporary societies, implies equality among the various groups, hence rejecting any discriminatory behaviour on any basis. Intercultural Dialogue is perceived as a core skill to negotiate diverse backgrounds within societies, founded on the premise of inclusion of different viewpoints (Perini 2015, 29–31). To this end, shared values are important, whether these have either been jointly developed through interaction during the bottom-up process, or are commonly accepted universal ones. In that respect, through interaction and exchange, Intercultural Dialogue does provide good services in advancing social justice and cohesion. Still, for a successful intercultural dialogue, the following interrelated concepts should be considered:

1. *Intercultural competences* and skills which include the 'creative ability to encounter other peoples and convert insights and challenges into innovation processes and new forms of expression', the ability to foster understanding and intercultural empathy, principles of acquiring behavioural components, etc. (cognitive, functional, personal and ethical competences, according to Lähdesmäki et al. 2020).
2. *Intercultural citizenship*, in reference to the personal responsibility of the individuals within such culturally diverse societies. This implies a body of active citizens (in contrast to passive voters), knowledgeable about their obligations as such, supporters of the constructive civic values of democracy and of human rights, advocating for equality, social justice, and shared spaces to practice those fundamental values (Bekemans 16–19).

¹⁶ For more details on the Intercultural Cities programme: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/interculturalcities/>

3. *Intercultural education*, a learning process that leads to acquiring knowledge of other cultures and installing patterns of availability, openness and dialogue, to empower and stimulate people (citizens) to ‘contribute to social cohesion, cultural enrichment with respect to diversity and on the basis of equality’ (Lähdesmäki et al. 2020).

A number of other complementary actions and partnerships are essential to foster intercultural dialogue and to empower civil society in its implementation. These include advocacy, partnership with local authorities, the media and academia, to provide capacity building and skills development, toolkits, role models and good practices. In addition, herein lies the great significance of networking, co-creation and ownership of the process, as well as developing evidence-based arguments and policies, that reflect the societal mode and its changes.

Since the societal perceptions are always fluid, the intercultural dialogue, as a policy, its substance and its implementing audience and groups, cannot be static, and it should constantly evolve and adapt to remain timely and effective, especially within such a dynamic and fluid regional environment. In addition, intercultural dialogue requires novel formats and vision, to remain relevant and updated for all the target groups, including the youth.

General notes and recommendations

An overview of the region under consideration seems to support the argument that Intercultural Dialogue has its limits, at least as it is currently applied by a civil society, which is collectively framed in specific boundaries, capabilities, institutions and practices, and in the presence of competing interests, autocratic and illiberal regimes, populism and inherent insecurity. Yet, a more scrutinised reading of the reality, can illustrate a more optimistic perception, as well as its potential to contribute more. In fact, the Anna Lindh Foundation’s Intercultural Trends Reports — published every three years and based on region-wide surveys, illustrate a somewhat different narrative in relation to the gloomy one that is usually portrayed in many media outlets, but also a (positive) change over time (starting from a baseline recorded before 2010) of the attitudes.¹⁷ In that respect, the following points intend to offer a set of observations to improve the performance and efficiency of Intercultural Dialogue, with regard to both the Civil Society’s performance and capabilities, and the practice of Intercultural Dialogue by the relevant agents:

1. On the state of Civil Society and the CSOs (formal and informal) in this region at large, there are major differences, not only between South, North, East and West, but also within those geographical sub-groupings. Those differences are not only related to their capabilities and development level, but most important to their ability to freely and effectively function

¹⁷ Published in 2010, in 2014 and in 2018, <https://www.annalindhfoundation.org/what-we-do/intercultural-trends-report>.

within their local environment. Yet, their potentials are equally high. In that respect, the collective action of CSOs, and their function through international, or intergovernmental, institutions and other networks, offers a leeway: they offer a safer space, for the weaker counterparts, consisting of a more influential backer, whereas by networking they increase their access to opportunities, develop their potentials and, through capacity-building, their skills, hence improving their performance and effectiveness.

2. There are several institutions that either conduct intercultural dialogue or have activities that are relevant to those who conduct it. Yet, frequently those institutions act irrespective of the others' programmes and agenda, indicating the insufficient level of coordination and communication between them.¹⁸ Hence, there is a need to assemble, under a structured platform, the various initiatives and institutions, in order to limit overlapping and boost their efficiency and effectiveness: it will provide them with a wide access to opportunities, new ideas and approaches, available tools and know-how. Such an initiative should be hosted (at least initially) by an institution that can enjoy high visibility, geographical and thematic outreach and acceptance, but also flexibility, in order to be able to perform a coordination role.
3. Youth remains the leading group to target, equip and empower for intercultural dialogue. Yet, bridging existing cultural divides should not lead to a new generational one. Therefore, various projects should envisage relevant formats and tools suitable for different target groups.
4. There is a need for further research of approaches, potentials, and techniques of intercultural dialogue, in order to also extend the outreach of intercultural dialogue to the difficult to reach, marginalised and sceptical groups. Moreover, its role in conflict resolution and confidence building should be studied.
5. A shared and commonly agreed set of values is an essential component of intercultural dialogue, whereas education (both formal and informal, at schools and within families) is of fundamental importance. Introducing intercultural dialogue as a subject in public education would be a major step forward. This could be implemented in the partnership with CSOs.
6. Intercultural dialogue is a practice and a tool, applied by CSOs and other institutional actors, to, often, deal with specific problems and complex conditions, within the diverse and sometimes even hostile environment. In such cases, the leading and experienced institutions applying intercultural dialogue, in cooperation with the local stakeholders and the CSOs on the ground, can draw up a tailor-made strategy and programme to meet the specific conditions and needs per case, also providing training and the relevant toolkits.¹⁹

¹⁸ An example: while the Anna Lindh Foundation developed the 'Intercultural Citizenship Education Handbook', a tool for civic education, it has not developed any cooperation with NECE (a network dedicated to civic education in Europe and, through its affiliated entities in the Arab world, Africa and Eastern Europe, <https://www.bpbconnect.eu/>) or other like-minded institutions to promote it.

¹⁹ This is the Council of Europe's 'Intercultural Cities Program' methodology, where the Council draws up a specific strategy to be implemented by the respective municipalities and the leading CSOs in their respective cities, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/interculturalcities/how-it-works->

7. There is a need to introduce more coherent and efficient monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, a toolkit that could recognise the social impact of the implemented policies and projects to improve the performance of the intercultural dialogue.²⁰
8. With regard to the diplomatic field, intercultural dialogue has a large arsenal of cultural means to perform a positive role in promoting the state image via public diplomacy, and an understanding among states and their societies. However, to a large extent, this also depends on the agents conducting the intercultural dialogue, as well as on the main goals and objectives of the initiated projects. Yet, the transparency of the objectives and goals public diplomacy seeks to achieve is important, since there might be some driving forces, like specific state and private priorities and interests, which could remain unknown to the general public and can contradict the rationale of such a dialogue.
9. The efficiency of the intercultural dialogue largely depends on awareness and personal commitment, as well as on individual social roles.

Given the complexity of the EU's neighbourhood, the political will to implement cultural interventions and policies remains a key factor. Therefore, advocacy and lobbying from all domains are essential, as well as results-driven policies and recommendations, as indeed enlarged partnerships between the leading stakeholders.

²⁰ Both ALF and EUNIC have been working in that direction, following the experience of the British Council and the Goethe-Institut. See, for instance, <https://www.goethe.de/resources/files/pdf94/culture-works-brochure-september-2016.pdf>, https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1_5y3xBpjsfY5khp_a77se66kaU-ytTCUI.

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