

# Does travel shape young people?

Bernard ABRIGNANI

Bernard Abrignani questions whether travels and exchanges are still relevant in a world where it is simpler and safer to virtually travel via one's computer. He argues that yet without direct encounters it is almost impossible to get to know the other. He discusses how ALF/Ipsos Survey respondents think of cultural differences and stereotypes as barriers towards cross-cultural encounters and how they believe in dialogue measures focusing on young people as an efficient way to live better in a multi-cultural society.

Why a question mark for an affirmative quote from the 16th century? This proverb is often attributed to Montaigne in 'From the Institution of Children' in Book I of the Essais (written between 1572 and 1592). Montaigne recommends for children to visit foreign countries (chapter XXV) and expresses the utility of such travel in the following way: 'to relate chiefly the humours of these nations and their manners, and to rub and bind our brains against that of others.'

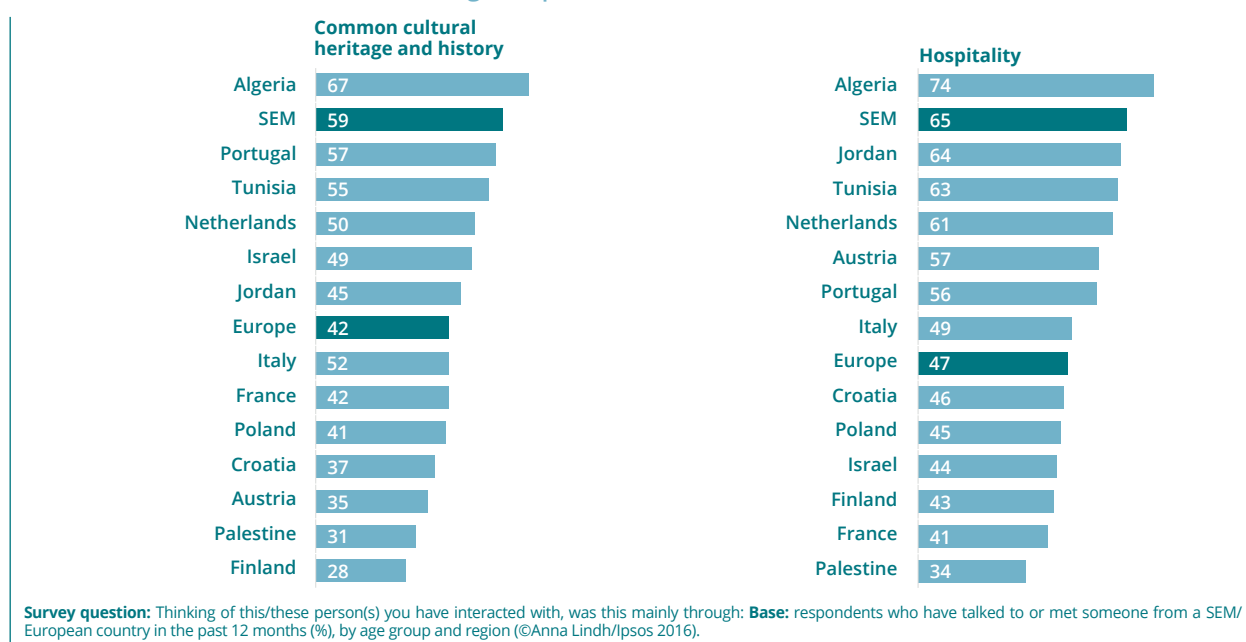
Glancing at the statistics, exchanges between the two sides of the Mediterranean Sea have never been more important – every year, more than 3,500 young people and youth leaders are the beneficiaries of the existing EU exchange programmes. This would tend to prove that there is a need for such exchange programmes and

this is supported by a strong motivation, 'you can move mountains, or at least build bridges'. In this article, I review the findings of the Anna Lindh/Ipsos Intercultural Trends Survey to support my claim that there is a need for exchange programmes, and although the questions in the Survey do not refer specifically to EU exchange programmes in the narrower sense, the findings are particularly relevant where they are based on questions about modes of interaction between individuals from European and SEM countries, barriers to cross-cultural encounters, and dialogue measures to fight extremism.

## The Mediterranean region as a region characterised by hospitality

Today too many young people, especially from the southern shore of Mediterranean, travel by obligation

**Chart 13.1** Characteristics of the Mediterranean region – positive associations



due to wars, dictatorships or loss of vision – and they do not travel for pleasure. According to the Anna Lindh/Ipsos Survey, with fieldwork conducted in the second half of 2016, 38% of respondents in SEM countries answered that the Mediterranean region was strongly characterised by instability and insecurity, 39% said that the region was a source of conflict and 36% saw the region as being strongly characterised by a resistance to change. In the European countries, fewer respondents answered that the Mediterranean region was strongly characterised by a resistance to change, as a source of conflict, or by issues of instability and insecurity (between 22% and 26%).

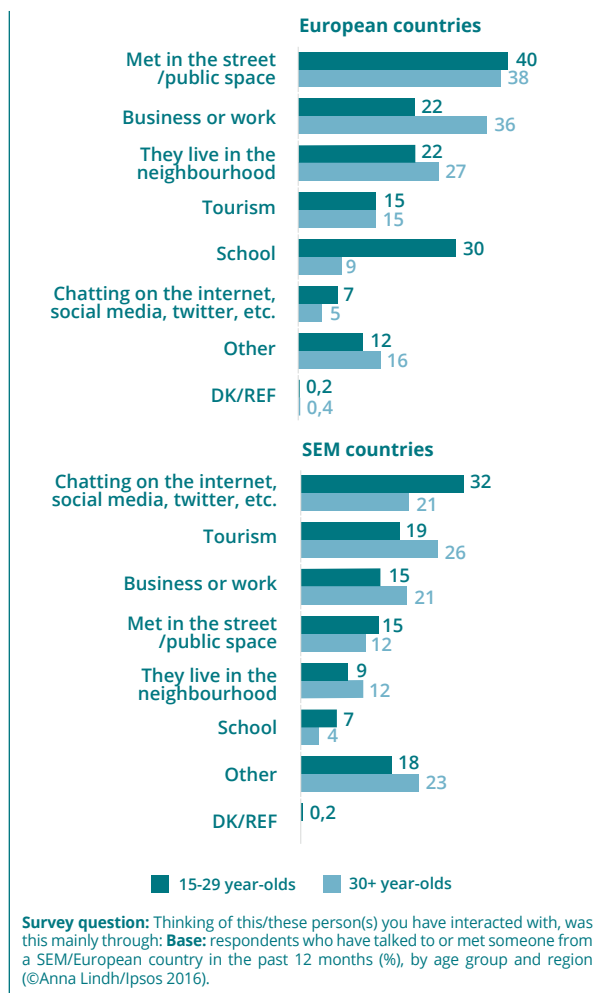
Although the Survey findings suggest that, in many countries, negative associations were regularly made when respondents were asked to think about the Mediterranean region, far more respondents associated the region with positive ideas and images. For example, the largest share of respondents in SEM countries thought that the region was strongly characterised by hospitality (65%), followed by a common cultural heritage and history (59%) (Chart 13.1). Young people who have benefited from the opportunities offered by the EU youth programmes experienced this hospitality first hand and have returned transformed. They have learned to know, discover, appreciate, and no longer fear what is unknown, which can often lead to hate.

### Importance of mutual and intercultural understanding

During the Age of Enlightenment intellectuals questioned the educational value of travel. As a response, in the article ‘Voyage’ of the *Jaucourt Encyclopedia* (1765), the author expresses the experimental function of travel and insists on the usefulness of personal contact with the ‘world’s great book’. But is travel still relevant in a world where virtuality has invaded reality, where it is simpler and safer to travel via one’s computer?

The Anna Lindh/Ipsos Survey shows that, in the European countries, 40% of young people (15-29 year-olds) who had talked to or met someone from a SEM country in the past 12 months, said they had met these people in the street or in a public place, and an additional 22% answered that people from SEM countries lived in their neighbourhood. In the SEM countries, on the other hand, more casual encounters in the street or neighbourhood occurred less frequently, while the main methods of interaction for young people were using social media and chatting on the internet (mentioned by 32% of 15-29 year-olds who had talked to or met someone from a European country) (Chart 13.2). As in the previous wave of the Survey on Intercultural Trends (conducted in 2012), the study confirms the importance of the internet in the SEM countries as a means of communication.

**Chart 13.2** Method of interaction for cross-cultural encounters, by age group



Maybe I am naïve, but I am convinced that without a ‘meeting of the 3rd type’, meaning direct contact, it is difficult, almost impossible, to get to know the other while learning to know oneself. Youth exchanges and visits have demonstrated themselves to be a tool and an important mechanism for European and cultural integration; mobility programmes such as Youth in Action, Erasmus, Tempus or Leonardo da Vinci have seen the enthusiastic participation of young people, academics and students, coming from Europe and its neighbouring countries. The positive effects of these programmes are visible: alongside mutual and intercultural understanding, participants not only learned new languages, but also had the chance to develop lasting contacts and further connections with their host countries. The European Commission carried out a survey in 2011 to assess the impact of Youth in Action projects; the findings of the survey confirm that the exchange experience not only increased participants’ foreign language proficiency but almost all participants also stressed that it made them more at ease with multi-culturalism and increased their appreciation of cultural diversity.

The findings of the Anna Lindh/Ipsos Survey, however, present a less rosy picture of mutual and intercultural understanding. In the Survey, respondents were asked what the main barriers would be when meeting with or talking to people in or from countries on the other side of the Mediterranean Sea. Understandably, language was considered to be the most significant barrier to cross-cultural encounters. However, when combining the figures for cultural differences and stereotypes, it quickly becomes clear that the latter type of barriers cannot be ignored (Chart 13.3). In fact, it should also be noted that many respondents had not had any encounters in the past year with people from the other side of the Mediterranean Sea, therefore answering a question about barriers for cross-cultural encounters might have been difficult for them. When focussing only on the responses of those who have friends or relatives who live in a country on the other side of the Mediterranean Sea (in other words, respondents who will have thought about their past encounters and the barriers they were confronted with), a drop is observed in the number who referred to language barriers, while a considerably larger number were concerned about stereotypes – especially in European countries.

### Young people as the driving force for change in the region

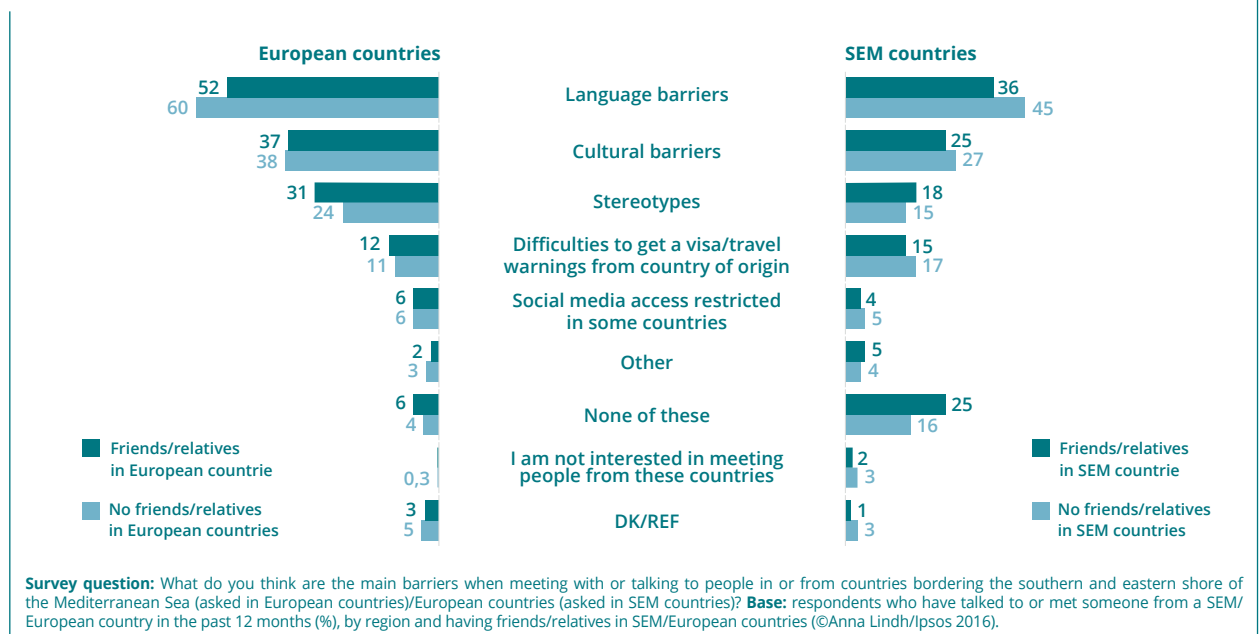
The Southern Mediterranean region is characterised by a high proportion of young people who have become one of the driving forces in their countries mainly due to the recent changes in the political and social landscape as a consequence of the so called ‘Arab Spring’ and its aftermath. Young people have been seeking to obtain more dignity, greater social justice and improved

economic conditions that enable them to achieve a better quality of life.

The Anna Lindh/Ipsos Survey shows that respondents across all countries surveyed would like to see young people as a primary target group of measures to prevent and deal with conflict and radicalisation. When asked to evaluate the efficiency of various mechanisms to prevent and deal with conflict and radicalisation in the Euro-Mediterranean region, about 80% of respondents in both country groups believed that education and youth programmes that foster youth-led dialogue initiatives and supporting youth participation in public life would be an effective measure to deal with conflict and radicalisation. Also interesting to observe is that 73% of respondents in European countries and 81% of respondents in SEM countries answered that exchange programmes involving people across the Mediterranean would be an efficient mechanism to prevent and deal with conflict and radicalisation.

Indeed, young people represent a great potential for their region; this is exactly what the EuroMed Youth Programme has been promoting through its activities and initiatives, and this is what should continue to be stressed in the Erasmus+ programme. The EuroMed Youth Programme was established in 1999, based on the experience acquired with youth exchanges in Europe, while taking into account the needs of the Mediterranean partners. Organised within the framework of the Barcelona Process and the European Neighbourhood Policy, the Youth in Action Programme had four phases, of which the last one ended in 2016. The general aims of EuroMed Youth programmes, as specified

**Chart 13.3** Barriers to cross-cultural encounters - Impact of having friends/relatives in SEM/European countries



in the programming document, were to facilitate the integration of young people into social and professional life and stimulate the democratisation of the civil society of the Mediterranean partners by encouraging active citizenship within local communities, promoting active participation of young people, and by developing the employability of those involved. By recognising the fundamental influence of youth within societies, a special focus on young people in the Mediterranean area has been provided and has thus been institutionalised starting from the framework of the Barcelona Process (1995). Not surprisingly, the Barcelona Declaration itself stresses that 'youth exchanges should be the means to prepare future generation for a closer cooperation between the Euro-Mediterranean partners'.

### Bringing the shores of the Mediterranean closer together

Youth exchange requires the active participation of all groups of young people in the preparation and implementation of the activities, and it should support projects and activities in which young people from different cultural, religious and ethnic backgrounds can work together. The following keys are essential in supporting youth exchange projects:

**Youth participation.** Providing unique opportunities for young people to become active and responsible citizens in their societies through participation.

**Intercultural dialogue and intercultural learning.** The richness of European and Mediterranean societies lies in cultural diversity expressed by the variety of religious, ethnic and cultural groups and communities which have been present across the region for many centuries. In this context, intercultural dialogue and intercultural learning are essential to counter and overcome mutual prejudices and the clash of civilizations.

**Democracy.** Starting from the premise that democracy is also a form of teaching (in the etymological sense of 'bringing about'), we must accept that the components of democracy are diverse and that young people should be involved. Decision makers must be prepared to move beyond the trap of merely 'showcasing' and instead become vehicles for the expression of representative democracy, preparing the ground for a move to a real participatory democracy.

In the Euro-Mediterranean youth programmes, what caught the eye is that young people across different countries share similar problems and challenges. The Euro-Mediterranean youth programmes are proof that young people in most of the countries in the Euro-Mediterranean region are faced with many, often similar, challenges in their local realities. By sharing experiences, you can start tackling these challenges

and the Euro-Mediterranean community has tried to do this. After all, 'there are millions of young people in the world who have one thing in common: they are in the process of preparing for adult life, seeking to ensure economic independence and to become productive members of their societies. For that to succeed, young people require the support and the help of their families, the conditions to live in peace, access to educational and health facilities, and productive, enjoyable leisure time' (European Union Programme Agency).

The Anna Lindh/Ipsos Survey highlighted some challenges for future exchanges between young people from both sides of the Mediterranean, but also showed us opportunities for such exchanges. A large share of respondents in the Survey thought that cross-cultural encounters are hampered by cultural differences and stereotypes, and these barriers would also be detrimental to youth exchanges. On the other hand, respondents across both sides of the Mediterranean believe in dialogue measures focusing on young people as an efficient way to help us live better together in a multi-cultural society and fight extremism. I would like to conclude with a thought that exchanges between young people from both sides of the Mediterranean make it possible to bring our two shores closer together and thus try to avoid what an illustrious 12th century Andalusian said and which unfortunately is the reality today: 'Ignorance leads to fear, fear leads to hate and hate leads to violence. That's the equation.' (Averroès: Lawyer, Mathematician, Physician, Philosopher, Scientist, Theologian (CE1126 - 1198).

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