

Italy: The Tragedy of Lampedusa and the Centrality of Mediterranean Affairs

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The latest Anna Lindh/Gallup Survey confirms that while knowledge of Southern Mediterranean countries in Italy remains limited, interest in issues of diversity and universal rights is growing. The authors reveal how the Lampedusa tragedy helped Italians realize the particular place their country occupies on the intercultural map. Through initiatives promoted by the Italian Network of the Anna Lindh Foundation, civil society organisations are focused on deepening knowledge of the other and combatting prejudices.

The perception of the Mediterranean area that emerges from the Anna Lindh/Gallup Poll carried out among the Italian survey sample is very interesting and influenced by the geographical location of this country, at the heart of the Euro-Mediterranean region. Most respondents identify the Mediterranean region with Italy (81%), while just a small number of them associates it to other countries, especially with those on the southern Mediterranean shore, such as Egypt (11%) for example. This data reveals something interesting about the conceptual framework that Italians have of “the Mediterranean area”. It can be assumed that many people associate the Mediterranean with Europe and perceive the Maghreb and the Mashreq areas, which also border the same sea and which, in the specific case of North Africa, constitute our direct neighbors, as others and distant.

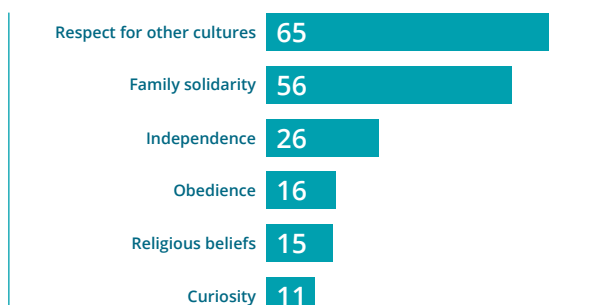
Diversity as a value and a threat

As it appears from the Survey, the interest in the Maghreb and the Mashreq primarily refers to the socio-cultural aspects of this area but this interest appears to be characterized by an “exotic” approach, a sort

of “orientalism”, to quote Edward Said. Among the origins of such a biased perception about the southern Mediterranean neighbors we could find news media but also a certain kind of tourism to North Africa and the Middle East which does not allow for in-depth cultural understanding of the visited places; and we should note that tourism accounts for the second most mentioned modality that Italians had to meet people from the other shore of the Mediterranean in 2012 (30%). In total 44% of respondents declared they had an intercultural encounter in 2012, and this was mainly through business (40%), tourism, meeting in the street, a public place (28%) or in the same neighborhood (25%) and only a minority by chatting through the internet (6%).

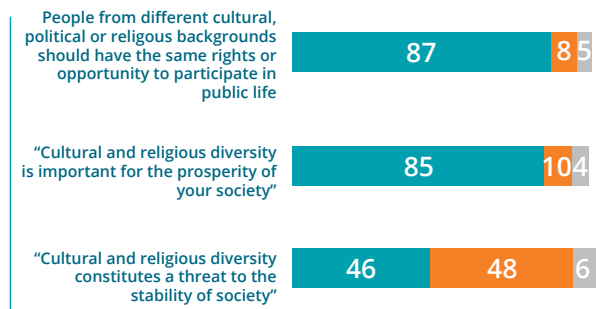
The relative high level of exposure to other cultures can offer also an explanation to the importance that Italians recognize to cultural diversity and the need to convey the respect for other cultures as a central value in the upbringing of their children (57%) (Chart 22.1), and also to the fact that 87% of Italians think that the same rights should be guaranteed to cultural, religious or ethnic minorities in the country. Nonetheless, even

Chart 22.1
Key values for Italians when bringing up their children



Survey Question: Assuming that we limit ourselves to six values only I'd like to know which one of these six would you say is most important when raising children? And the second most important? **Base:** % of all respondents, % of the sum of 'Most important' and 'Second most important' answers are shown (© Anna Lindh / Gallup Poll 2012)

Chart 22.2
Views about political, cultural and religious diversity in Italy



Survey Question: Could you please tell me, how much do you agree or disagree with the following statements? **Base:** % of all respondents, where 'Agree': sum of 'Strongly agree' and 'Agree somewhat' answers, and 'Disagree': sum of 'Strongly disagree' and 'Disagree somewhat' answers (© Anna Lindh / Gallup Poll 2012).

Chart 22.3

Most efficient ways of solving problems in Italy



Survey Question: How do you think you could most efficiently contribute to solving the problems in your country? **Base:** % of all respondents (© Anna Lindh / Gallup Poll 2012).

if this population is aware of the positive impact of cultural diversity for the prosperity of the country (85%), half of the population (48%) reckons that this could also constitute a threat to internal stability (Chart 22.2). Lastly, with reference to the so-called “Arab Spring”, many respondents (44%) believe that it will have a positive impact on the future of Euro-Mediterranean relations for its implications for the promotion of democracy and the respect of human rights. The concept of democracy for the majority of Italians (66%) seems mainly identified with “freedom”, in a broad sense, but very little with the participation of people in the political decision making process (2%). This observation is further supported by another Poll result which reveals how little Italians trust in political parties to effectively solve the problems of their society (6%) and attach much more importance to what they can do through their individual action (25%) and joining social movements (13%) (Chart 22.3).

Civic engagement to combat stereotypes

Today, it is very easy to get news about Mediterranean and Arab Countries. In particular, after the Arab Spring, information concerning the southern shore of the Mediterranean has become frequent. Everybody, through the media - printed or electronic - can access it. However, the perception of these countries, and of the Mediterranean in general, does not always corresponds to reality. It is often the result of clichés or beliefs that create false stereotypes. Therefore, the fieldwork in the intercultural context, as international cooperation and counter or correct information, appears nowadays urgent and necessary. Those who work professionally in this field face complex issues, often related to a superficial knowledge of the region.

It's geographical location makes of Italy a “natural intercultural laboratory” and the island of Lampedusa is an emblematic example of this. Lampedusa is a bridge

between Europe and Africa and has become in recent years the “door to life,” as migrants refer to it. The island is also, however, the scene of personal and collective tragedies. Thousands have died in the Sicilian Channel as a result of shipwrecks and many have been buried on the island, often nameless. Lampedusa is also a crossroads of peoples and stories, and centuries of culture. Because of the importance that the Island has taken in the contemporary history of migration, the Italian Anna Lindh Foundation Network, newly constituted as RIDE Rete italiana per il Dialogo Euromediterraneo, organized, in 2012 and 2013, a series of international debates and cultural activities “Mediterranean networking. Step one Lampedusa,” directly coordinated by Arci - Independent Association of Social and Civil Promotion, to promote reflection and identify, new strategies for the integration of migrants, the respect of their rights and the re-launch of Lampedusa, as a land rich of culture and opportunities, and not only as the first harbor for people in search for a better future in Europe.

Within the overall scope of deepening the knowledge of other cultures, Paralleli – Euro Mediterranean Institute of the North West, initiated “An inquire about the veil across the Mediterranean.” The project created a space for dialogue and debate between Italian citizens and Muslim women, resident in Italy and in countries of the southern Mediterranean, on the issue of the veil benefiting from the direct experience related and analysed by these women, as users or not of the veil. Another positive example of dialogue work is represented by the “Dialogue for Peace” Workshops organized by Fondazione Mediterraneo to identify and reflect on practices based on dialogue and non-violence for conflict resolution, both in case of armed conflicts and in case of social, ethnic or political conflicts. The above mentioned projects are meant to give only an idea of the variety of activities that the members of the Italian Network implement through an “open” and “bottom up” methodological approach to raise people's knowledge and interest about the complex socio-cultural issues of the Euro-Mediterranean region.

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