

A Vision for Social and Cultural Relations in the Euro-Med Region

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The latest Anna Lindh/Gallup Survey reveals a growing appetite for better knowledge and understanding, brought on by exchange among the actors of the region. Claire Spencer analyses the Mediterranean as one coherent body, explaining how the southern 'Arab Spring' might have inspired the 'indignados' and other movements in Europe. The author also calls upon policy-makers to acknowledge that the time has come to end the top-down frameworks, which risk to continue being at a distance from the citizens whom they serve.

Opinion surveys are extremely useful for capturing a moment in time to confirm, or even confound, schematic images of public opinion seized in more tangential and circumstantial ways. What the 2012 Anna Lindh/Gallup Poll Survey reveals about the current state of Euro-Mediterranean intercultural trends is also of more immediate relevance to what comes next than its predecessor of 2009. Conducted after the events of 2011 in the latter half of 2012, this survey necessarily reflects a region, to the North and South of the Mediterranean, that is in a state of flux as well as open to new forms of self-expression.

This means that the views expressed are unlikely to remain static, representing instead an insight into the process of adjusting to new circumstances. They may also, in part, indicate longer-term trends. How the responses are interpreted, however, assumes that there is a common context within which the questions are posed and responded to. In reality, there are many more contexts now than in 2009 which objectively and subjectively shape the way people view the world around them. Whether this contributes to forming a shared vision of the Mediterranean remains in doubt; what it may do is enrich and diversify the debate about what matters to people in and beyond the Mediterranean space, and perhaps most importantly, why.

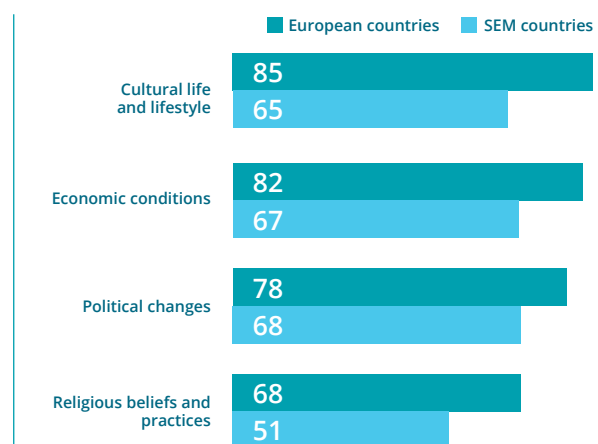
Mobilisation across the region

This Survey apart, not many examinations of what is now variously referred to as the Arab Awakenings or 'Arab Spring' have encapsulated the sub-regional, or trans-Mediterranean, effects of change and protest witnessed on both sides of the Mediterranean. The protest movement of 'los indignados' in Spain, for example, has more often been analysed in the context of the Eurozone crisis than as an offshoot of the protests that arose earlier across North Africa. Even if the focus of Europe's protest movements have been primarily national, and only residually European in target when they spread among European countries affected by

austerity and high levels of unemployment (Prentoulis and Thomassen, 2013), the example set by events in Tunisia and Egypt from late December 2010 inspired the form that youth-led street protests took in Spain, Greece and beyond.

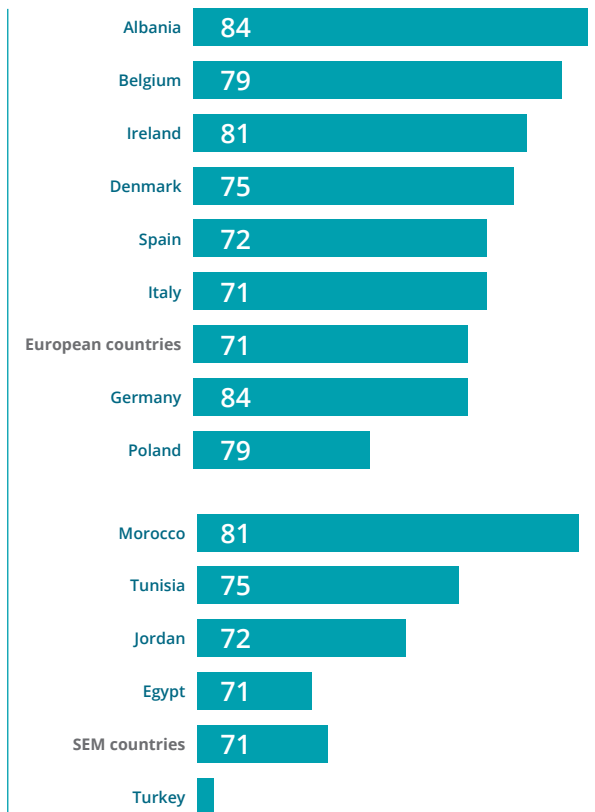
European protesters have also been focused as much on demands for political inclusion and participation as on the economic demands of whole populations excluded from the perceived financial self-interest of current political establishments (see Manifesto of 'Movimiento 15'). While these demands and the challenges they highlight have yet to be fully met or resolved on either side of the Mediterranean, the idea that societies can act in new ways outside formal political structures is likely to inspire, and re-inspire, similar movements in coming years. Whether they take place within a more consciously defined Euro-Mediterranean space, however, remains to be determined.

Chart 10.1 Interest in news and information about European / SEM countries



Survey Question: Thinking about SEM / European countries, how much interest would you say you personally have in news and information about their ... ? **Base:** % of all respondents ; % of sum of 'Very interested' and 'Somewhat interested' by regions (© Anna Lindh / Gallup Poll 2012).

Chart 10.2
Interactions in the EuroMed region

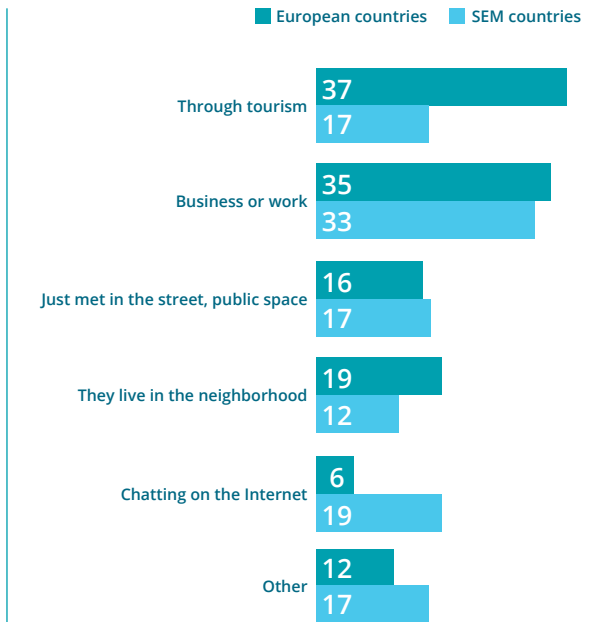


Survey Question: In the last 12 months have you personally talked to or met with any person (or persons) from SEM / European countries?
Base: % of all respondents ; % of 'Yes' by country (© Anna Lindh / Gallup Poll 2012).

The renewed debate about trans-Mediterranean migration, unleashed by the tragic death-toll of sub-Saharan migrants off the Italian island of Lampedusa in October 2013 (BBC news, 2013), suggests that existing obstacles to establishing more intensified links between the northern and southern shores of the Mediterranean are likely to remain. Alternatively, and now that the problem of sub-Saharan migration has become a domestic as well as external challenge for transiting states, there may be new opportunities to build on the cooperation that has already been established, albeit only at an inter-governmental level so far to police and control illegal migration flows (i.e., RFI, 2014). What has been clearly recognised now is the need for more imaginative, and humane, ways of addressing the movements of people within and beyond the Mediterranean region.

In respect of the evolution of Euro-Mediterranean relations since 2011, the survey data certainly demonstrates that there is a growing appetite for mutual knowledge and understanding. This is in keeping with what might have been expected from a period in which the Mediterranean region has come under a fresh spotlight, given the youth-based and 'new generational' outlook of the region's core protest movements. The 2012 polling data registers

Chart 10.3
Method of interaction



Survey Question: How did you meet or talk to that person? **Base:** Those who talked to or met with persons from other countries; % of mentions by regions (© Anna Lindh / Gallup Poll 2012).

high levels of personal interest, including across generational divides, in receiving news and information about political and economic developments on the other side of the Mediterranean. (Chart 10.1) What this means in practice is hard to discern from the figures alone – which range from 88% interest in Germany to 62% (interest in economics) and 58% (interest in politics) in Egypt. It would require further qualitative analysis to ascertain whether this reflects a greater preoccupation with local developments in the case of Egypt, or whether other factors – including European anxiety about the consequences of developments in the southern Mediterranean - come into play.

Social changes and mutual perceptions

The Survey also confirms that positive images of the other have prevailed since 2010, and have even increased as information flows have expanded. The image of the Mediterranean as region of insecurity and turmoil is consistently lower in Europe and the southern Mediterranean (31% and 23% respectively) than the positive attributes accorded to the region of hospitality (50.5% overall) and a distinct way of life and food (56% overall).

Despite official European assurances from 2011 that South-North visa regimes would be reviewed in favour of greater mobility within Europe, the opportunity to interact directly with others remains skewed in favour of the northern shores of the Mediterranean.

Europeans (41% overall) typically register most contacts through business and the tourist destinations of the southern Mediterranean, such as Morocco, which are reflected in the higher numbers of Moroccans (57%) than other southern Mediterraneans (averaging 20%) to have interacted with their European counterparts (Chart 10.2, Chart 10.3).

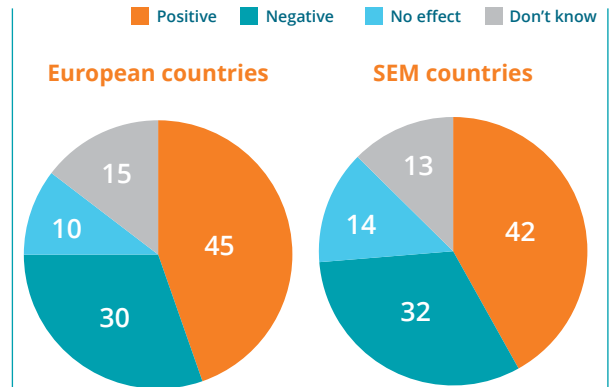
Even though the image of the Other remains more positive than negative, assessments of whether the Mediterranean's citizens are more engaged in democratic transitions than in resisting change remained evenly balanced on both sides of the Mediterranean. This perception may have changed since the removal of Egypt's President Morsi from office in July 2013 and the setback to electoral politics might be seen in the context of setbacks which ought to be expected in long-term democratic transitions.

The disappointments of the 'Arab Spring' only gained real currency over the course of 2013, prompted by the ongoing instability in Libya, the Mali crisis from January 2013, swiftly followed by the In Amenas gas-plant attack in Algeria, and the wider tragedy of the Syrian conflict, all of which brought the threat of al-Qaeda-inspired jihadism back to the centre-stage of regional security concerns.

How these events have subsequently impacted on European images of Southern and Eastern Mediterranean (SEM) societies and/or distinguished them from the dynamics which now appear to be governing developments in the Levant and Gulf further east would provide an interesting prism through which to gauge how synergies are changing within, as well as across, the Mediterranean region. The much feared fragmentation, or indeed intangibility, of the Mediterranean Basin as a framework for enhancing North-South cooperation might now, in fact, be better evaluated through its sub-regional alternatives, encompassing both littorals of the Mediterranean.

The most relevant polling data to explore in this respect are the mutual perceptions of Mediterranean societies in closest proximity to each other, such as Morocco, Spain and Portugal, where trade, investment and labour market links have been rising in recent years. More Spaniards consider the 'Arab Spring' to have had a positive (47%) than a negative effect (25%) on European-Arab relations, while 28% combined think it has had no impact, or gave no view on the issue. This suggests that sub-regional cooperation has been growing as much out of the economic crises on both sides of the Western Mediterranean prior to 2011 as from opportunities to identify new areas of common interest arising since the Arab Spring. The Straits of Gibraltar may remain closed to the free circulation

Chart 10.4 Ultimate effect of the 'Arab Spring' on the Euro-Arab relations



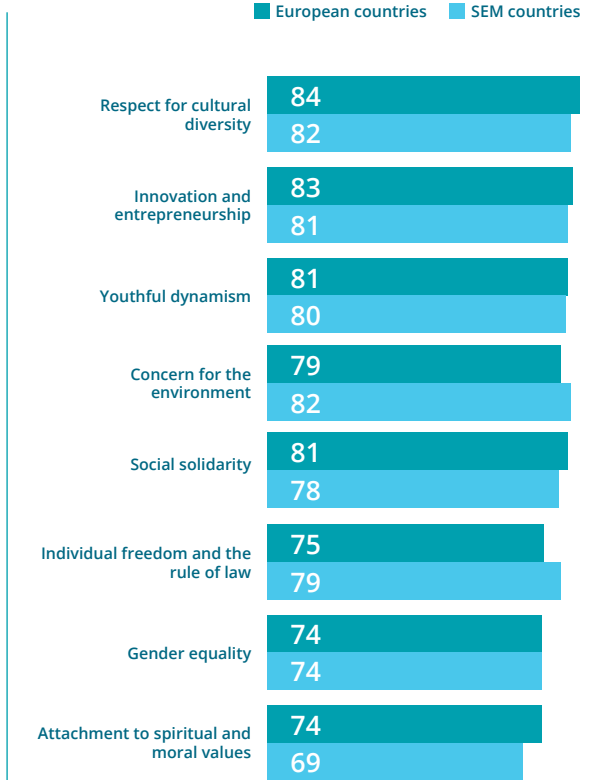
Survey Question: Most of the Arab countries are experiencing significant changes started with social movements which have been called an 'Arab Spring'. What do you think, will be the ultimate effects of these changes on the relations between Europe and the Arab countries? Will these changes be [...] **Base:** % of all respondents, by regions (© Anna Lindh / Gallup Poll 2012).

of peoples for now, but proximity, as well as necessity, do not always translate into greater animosity or closure to the other despite prevailing cultural and socio-political differences

Implication for the future of the UfM

What this kind of development means in turn for the future of the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) is really a function of how well known and visible the impacts of its regional and project-led initiatives prove to be. The polling data only captures the potential for the UfM to increase respect for cultural diversity and innovation and entrepreneurship, which register positive scores (up to 85% support) on both sides of the Mediterranean; the realisation of these aspirations remains outside the scope of the questions posed (Chart 6). Even in Euro-Mediterranean policy-making circles, one received wisdom - which the latest generation of UfM officials and staff have worked hard to dispel - is that the UfM is a mere shadow of the ambitions espoused by the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (or 'Barcelona process') which preceded it from 1995. Like many inter-governmental processes and agencies, the UfM risks being at a distance from the citizens whose lives its various mandates - on regional energy, infrastructure and water cooperation, as well as youth and women's employment and education - seek to improve. It is dependent on raising private sector backing as well as public funding for its initiatives and is likely to succeed only insofar as its importance is recognised by its key stakeholders as well as its target audiences. In troubled times, it is easy to overlook the importance of regional initiatives to galvanise new ways of stimulating cooperation: even where they are making progress - as in the UfM's role

Chart 10.5
What would society gain from the UfM



Survey Question: Your country, with other European countries and the countries on the southern and eastern shore of the Mediterranean, has decided to establish closer political, economic and cultural exchanges, within a project called ‘Union for the Mediterranean’. Which of the mentioned aspects do you think your society can gain from such a shared project? **Base:** % of all respondents (© Anna Lindh / Gallup Poll 2012).

of joining up regional transport infrastructure such as the Trans-Maghreb Highway project across North Africa (UfM, 2012) – they only work if the local political and economic conditions permit and actors other than the UfM also engage in supporting them.

The total sum of efforts made by those now active on the Mediterranean arena, both virtual and tangible, are likely to be the best measure of whether the Mediterranean, as a region, has a future relevant to the peoples who live there or are just passing through. Most attempts in the past to create a template or vision for the Mediterranean have been swiftly disappointed by the lack of sustainable leadership to see such visions materialise and prevail. The plurality of the Mediterranean has always been one of its characteristics, woven through by the common virtues captured by the survey, of openness, hospitality and the joie de vie of its coastal lifestyles and cuisine.

In an era when pluralism, inclusion, justice and mutual acceptance have been at the forefront of protest movements across the Mediterranean region,

we may be nearing the end of top-down visions and frameworks designed by inter-governmental committees. If the alternatives play to the Mediterranean’s historical strengths of cultural and linguistic exchange and the gradual integration of diversity, then so much the better. The varying, and variable, results that emerge are more likely to meet the needs and aspirations of respondents actively shaping their own new contexts than a ‘one-size-fits-all’ umbrella or plan.

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