

# Understanding and engagement to overcome polarisation

Nabil FAHMY and Emilia VALSTA

Trying to explore ways to face radicalisation in the region, Nabil Fahmy and Emilia Valsta started their article by assessing the complex reasons that might lead to the transformation of passive polarisation into active radicalisation. Referring to the findings of the Anna Lindh/Ipsos Survey, the authors argue that interventions are needed in three areas – media, education and youth – each requiring reforms that allow for the induction of critical and creative thinking, narratives challenging misperception, and youth enabling environments.

In the current socio-political atmosphere that is persistently polarizing political discourse and dividing societies throughout the world, fostering dialogue and understanding of the 'other' within and between countries appears ever more urgent. As globalization gradually interweaves the world together, it increases complex interdependence, moving information rapidly and exposing individuals and communities to new information, which itself challenges the prevailing understandings of the world.

The exposure can also quickly become a source of anxiety and be viewed as an encroachment on one's distinct way of life, as cultures become increasingly homogenized across borders. Cultural assimilation can be regarded as a threat to existing values and norms, precipitating a conservative counter-revolution aiming to protect the local customs and values.

The vicious cycle of growing anxiety towards the 'other' and their values has become permeated and exacerbated by the internet and information technology that disseminate information regardless of whether it is based on fact or not. Online news sites and the social media give a voice to anyone with an agenda, be it malignant or not, and empower the most outrageous agitators with their tirades. Finding most unbiased information from the endless pool of news and articles can be overwhelming and even impossible without some guidance. Moreover, the polarization of opinions can exacerbate human tendency to search for and interpret information in accordance with our pre-existing beliefs about the world around us.

Despite increased diversity in many countries, many of us continue to live in homogeneous environments – liberal urbanites surround themselves with like-minded individuals and rarely interact with the often more conservative rural population. Of course the ideological delineation is not this black and white but in fact much

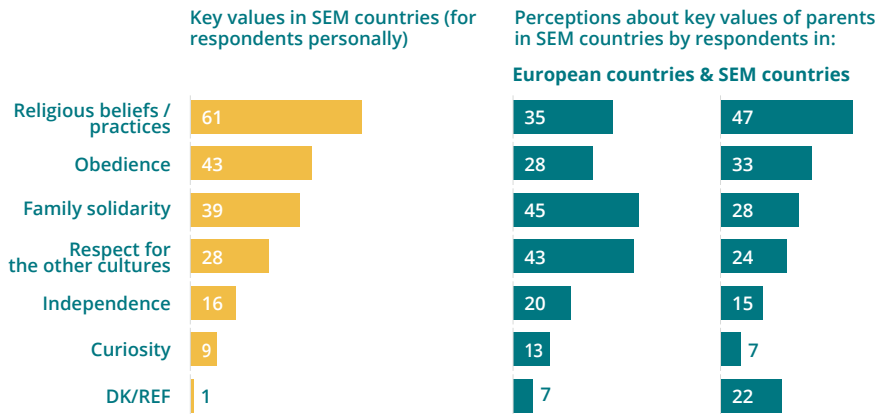
more complex. The widening ideological gap then results in different normative visions for the future. Increased interaction is thus not only necessary between different countries and cultures but fostering dialogue between the liberal and conservative population within each country is equally important.

Luckily, ideological polarization does not automatically lead to radicalization or violent extremism. The reasons behind someone becoming radicalized and adopting violent extremism are complex and vary from one individual to another. Globalization, frustration, poverty or feelings of being marginalized do not in themselves explain radicalization. Often radicalization is a combination of individual traits, as well as feelings of isolation and frustration stemming from larger socio-political processes. More dangerous than individual radicalization is how these outlier individuals perpetrating violent acts start to characterize entire communities. Islamophobia has spread rapidly throughout western countries as many associate terrorism and violent extremism to all Muslims. Likewise, perceiving every European as an intolerant Islamophobic exacerbates polarization and further consolidates flawed stereotypes and enables them being used in the promotion of certain political agendas. Combatting misperceptions and the tendency to label entire groups on the basis of individual actions requires not only better critical thinking but also meaningful dialogue and better understanding of the other through interaction.

## Which misperceptions persists?

The Anna Lindh/Ipsos Survey offers some clues as to how can we fight socio-political polarization and the need to revert back to homogeneity, as well as misperceptions that at times lead to individual radicalization, be it nationalist or religious fundamentalist radicalization. Three themes stand out from the Survey that could be seen as opportune areas for cooperation in order

**Chart 3.1** Perceptions about key values for parents raising children in SEM countries



**Survey question:** In bringing up their children, parents in different countries may place different emphasis on different values. Assuming that we limit ourselves to six values only, I'd like to know which one of these is most important, to you personally, when raising children? And the second most important? And which one of these six do you think is most important to parents raising children in countries bordering the southern and eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea? And the second most important?  
**Base:** all respondents (%), by region (©Anna Lindh/Ipsos 2016).

to foster more meaningful intercultural interaction and ensure a better understanding of the 'other' on both sides of the Mediterranean: increasing media literacy, promoting tolerance and understanding of cultural differences in educational systems and supporting youth programmes and initiatives promoting youth-led dialogue.

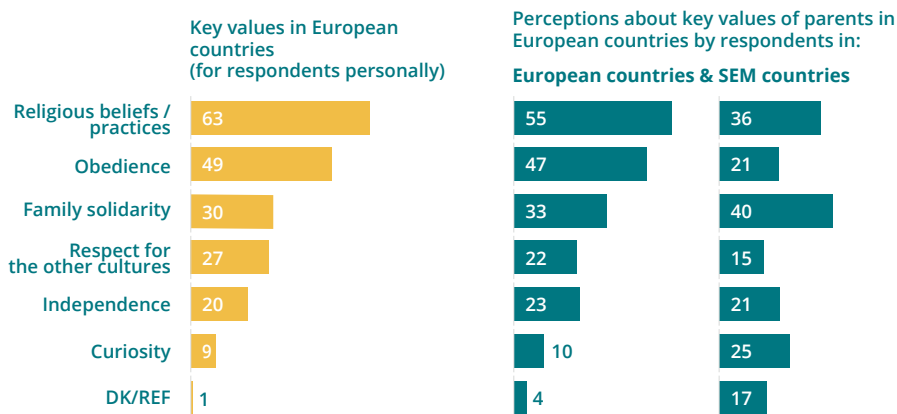
As the Survey data show, misperceptions on both sides of the Mediterranean about the other are ubiquitous. Europeans perceive family solidarity and respect for other cultures to be more important key values than religious beliefs and practices and obedience for parents raising children in the SEM countries. However, respondents from the SEM countries rated religious beliefs and practices and obedience higher than family

solidarity and respect for other cultures when raising children in their respective countries. Europeans perceive religion playing a far lesser role than it actually does (Chart 3.1 and 3.2).

On the other hand, SEM residents believe independence is an important value when raising children in Europe and see the value of family solidarity emphasized less in a child's upbringing. Interestingly however, Europeans overwhelmingly see the respect for other cultures and family solidarity as the two most important values – independence being accepted as an important value by only 30% of those surveyed.

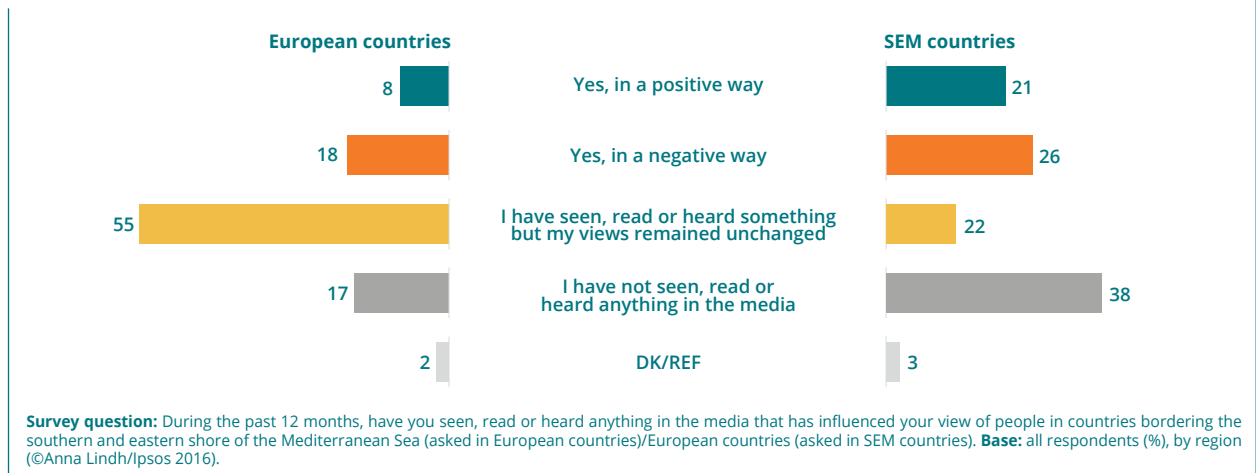
The danger of merely exposing Europeans and SEM citizens to news about the other side without focusing

**Chart 3.2** Perceptions about key values for parents raising children in Europe



**Survey question:** In bringing up their children, parents in different countries may place different emphasis on different values. Assuming that we limit ourselves to six values only, I'd like to know which one of these is most important, to you personally, when raising children? And the second most important? And which one of these six do you think is most important to parents raising children in Europe? And the second most important? **Base:** all respondents (%), by region (©Anna Lindh/Ipsos 2016).

**Chart 3.3** Media role in shaping perceptions about people in SEM/European countries



on actual understanding is reflected in the Anna Lindh/Ipsos Survey as well. When asking respondents whether media changed their views about people from the other region, 26% responded ‘yes, in a negative way’ compared to the 21% who replied ‘yes, in a positive way’. To be fair, 38% had not seen, read or heard anything about the other in the media. Among Europeans, 55% were far less likely to change their views about the other group as a result of being exposed to any news about SEM, compared to 12% in SEM countries (Chart 3.3).

This could reflect many things, including that media literacy is more entrenched in European educational systems thus enabling respondents to better critically analyse the news they consume. Another explanation could be the independence of media in Europe and its role as a servant of the civil society rather than promoting government agenda (although currently alt-right and alt-left news outlets that are publishing articles are threatening the objectivity of media based on flawed information). Exposing the public, and especially students, to other reliable news outlets outside Europe would offer them an alternative lens to look at the world we live in and push them to see issues from various perspectives.

### Education and media to challenge prevailing narratives

Promoting media literacy to train people to spot flawed information and offering people views that challenge the prevalent narratives, coupled with fostering dialogue about the way of life and beliefs of each side on both sides of the Mediterranean, could not only be an efficient way of deterring fake news from having an impact on people’s view of the ‘other’ but could also help challenge the prevailing narrative often promoted by the media. Moreover, investing in media literacy would promote

critical thinking which is often a shortcoming, especially in the educational systems throughout SEM countries.

This also requires a large-scale educational reform in SEM countries, one that would better promote understanding of the nuances of social and political life in the complex world we live in. In fact, a recent article published in the Jordan Times by Professors Allison Hodgkins and Ted Purinton of the American University in Cairo argues for investing in liberal arts education. They argue that instead of promoting science based thinking and ‘handing down a series of formulae to be applied when specific problems arise, a liberal arts education encourages students to investigate the causes to those problems, and to devise creative, independent solutions’ (The Jordan Times, 2016). They continue pointing out that there is a huge oversupply of doctors, pharmacists and engineers in the Middle East but a limited capacity to absorb these graduates. The youth is well educated but is facing a saturated job market, which also implies the need for educational reform and deeper economic restructuring.

Linked to the aforementioned point about media literacy, perhaps surprisingly the Survey results also point out that TV remains the most trusted media outlet for cross-cultural reporting for Europeans as well as citizens of SEM countries – 45% and 58% respectively ranked TV as number one outlet for news consumption. Social media is a more trusted source in SEM countries, 27%, compared to European countries, 18%. Trust in the print media in the SEM countries was distinctly lower, 15%, than surveyed in the European countries, 40%). Further research should be conducted on the types of TV programmes, accuracy of the information it conveys and the quality of news people consume in both regions in order to find out how TV affects people’s perceptions.

Despite the misperceptions, interaction between citizens of the two regions on average seems to result in a positive change of views about the other, offering some evidence in support of the claim that increasing meaningful interaction is the right way forward. Most likely due to more opportunities to travel and due to immigration from SEM countries, Europeans were more likely to have interacted with someone from a SEM country over the past 12 months (53% compared to 35% of respondents in SEM countries). Even though 65% of SEM respondents had not talked or met someone from Europe, 17% of those who had interacted with a European reported that meeting someone changed their views about Europeans in a positive way with 12% of respondents acknowledging that their views had remained unchanged. Only 2% in both regions admitted that their views had been negatively impacted by an encounter with someone from the other region.

However, some caution should be exercised when promoting intercultural exchanges and exposing Europeans and SEM citizens to each other's views and values. Differing views in certain areas such as women's role in society or perception of diversity and social stability among other variables surveyed have the potential for misunderstanding.

### Supporting dialogue and identity building

When it comes to perceptions about radicalization, 81% of Europeans and 85% of SEM respondents thought that education and youth programmes and initiatives fostering youth-led dialogue were considered an effective means to tackle radicalization. 85% of SEM respondents also think that an important mechanism would be to support youth participation in public life. Exchange programmes (81%), cultural and artistic initiatives (82%), inter-religious dialogue (76%) as well as media training for cross-cultural reporting (80%) were also considered as effective means to curtail radicalization according to SEM respondents.

Many of the perceived ways to reduce the allure of extremism require domestic reforms and a change in the political paradigm. The push towards reforming education, offering better participation in the public sphere and ensuring job opportunities must be done on the macro level. What foundations like the Anna Lindh can do, however, is to promote media literacy as well as invest in youth-led dialogue initiatives on both sides of the Mediterranean.

There is always a possibility that encounter and dialogue could exacerbate the perceived differences rather than promote understanding and acceptance. Dialogue does not magically translate into understanding but instead has to be accompanied by rigorous efforts to shape exclusive, rigid social and political identities on

both sides of the Mediterranean. One might also further ask whether intercultural encounters ought to initially be promoted among certain sectors of society, such as university students or those politically aware or maybe among even younger children?

However before we draw grand conclusions, it is important not to generalize too much. Perceptions may differ between the urban and rural population (as rural populations may tend to be more conservative in both regions). Moreover, country specific answers could in fact differ greatly within the SEM countries as those countries surveyed often have subtle nuances in their worldviews due to their respective socio-political and economic circumstances as well as the class structure and differing levels of inequality – for example, Palestinian and Tunisian respondents were often found on the opposite sides of the scale in terms of answers. The Israeli-Palestine conflict most likely framed many responses from Palestinians and Israelis in a way that did not frame those of other nationalities. Moreover, the results could have been swayed if Egypt or Libya were included. We are assisting to change in many political systems, which require us to take into consideration how the larger socio-political developments will affect the answers in the future. Nevertheless, despite the problems with polling, they should not deter organization and foundations like the Anna Lindh from compiling rigorous polls and reports. They are essential, not only for our understanding of the larger on-going social developments, but also for us to be able to find ways to constantly come up with better and more effective policy.

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