

Belgium: Civic Action Centered on Social Integration

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While all of Europe was watching as the Arab Spring broke to fruition, the expectations of how its developments may impact on the North-South relations are not necessarily positive. The authors explain the limited knowledge of Belgian citizens about the Mediterranean, associating their southern neighbours mainly with immigration. Despite Belgium's diverse population and openness to cross-cultural dialogue, insufficient information on the Mediterranean Other presents a challenge for civil society working against prejudice.

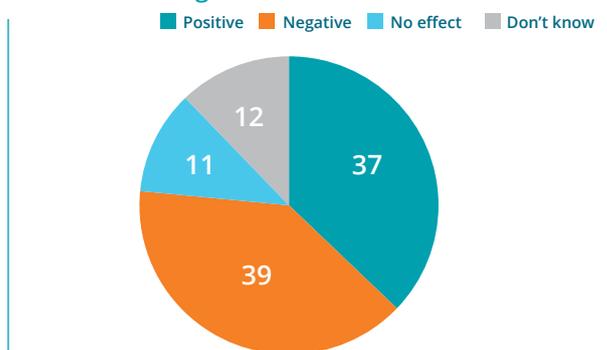
Since 2011 the images of crowds in Tunis and Cairo spread around the world. The uprising which occurred on the southern shore of the Mediterranean had raised hopes; yet the uncertainty today surrounding the continued movement stimulates a feeling of uneasiness in European public opinion. This apprehension is essentially structured around the political consequences the impact on migratory flows that these events will have.

How the Belgians see the Mediterranean

When analyzing the Survey results of the Anna Lindh Foundation on Intercultural trends and societal changes in Belgium, we find that there is some coherence among the answers given and what we just said. Expectations of Belgians regarding democracy and their relationship with the Arab Mediterranean countries following the Arab Spring rather demonstrate their concern. Most of the Belgians interviewed (39%) think that the consequences of the changes are negative for relations between Europe and the Arab countries. Another part of Belgium, similar percentage (37%) believes that these changes are positive for the future of Euro-Arab relations. It is also remarkable that 12% of respondents have no opinion on this issue, which shows a lack of knowledge on the significant changes occurring in the region (Chart 17.1).

Interviewees link the Mediterranean mainly to Spain, Italy and France, followed distantly by the southern and eastern Mediterranean (SEM). Less than half of the Mediterranean countries are indeed mentioned (10 of 23 countries) by the Belgian respondents. This reveals once again a lack of basic knowledge on the Mediterranean. In addition, the Survey results show that the interaction of the Belgians with SEM populations is mainly the result of a tourist and business displacement. Thus, the interaction does not produce a significant knowledge of these countries and is limited to food and the testimony of lifestyle. On the other hand, (24%) of those questioned said that they have met or talked to one (or more) person(s) from a country bordering the southern

Chart 17.1
Ultimate effect of the Arab Spring on the Euro-Arab relations for Belgians



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: Positive, Negative, or with No effect? **Base:** % of all respondents, where 'Positive' effect: sum of 'Very positive' and 'Positive' answers, and 'Negative' effect: sum of 'Very negative' and 'Negative' answers (© Anna Lindh / Gallup Poll 2012).

and eastern shores of the Mediterranean Sea in another frame. In fact, one must think about contacts between immigrants from SEM countries and their countries of origin as over the last decade, Belgium saw the arrival of a net entry of immigrants of nearly half a million people, i.e. 4.5% of its population.

Issues of migration and social cohesion

Concerning the characteristics of the Mediterranean region, respondents cite the first positive characteristics such as lifestyle and Mediterranean food, hospitality, history and common cultural heritage before citing the most negative characteristics (resistance to change, agitation, insecurity, source of conflict). But Belgians still appreciate the importance of family solidarity, spirituality and ethics in these countries. It is interesting to see that Belgians choose mostly the Western or European area rather than the southern and eastern Mediterranean countries to start a new life.

Chart 17.2

Characteristics of the Mediterranean region for Belgians



Survey Question: I will read out a set of ideas/images that may come to the minds of different people, and please tell me, if you think these characterize the Mediterranean region strongly, somewhat or not at all? **Base:** % of all respondents % of the sum of 'Strongly characterize' and 'Somewhat characterize' answers are shown (© Anna Lindh / Gallup Poll 2012).

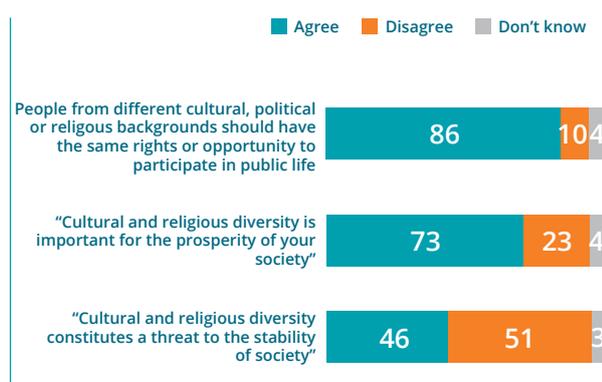
It was in the context of migration after World War II that migration flows of Turks and Moroccans in Belgium, developed forming the main non-European communities in Belgium. In 17 February 1964, Belgium concluded a bilateral agreement with Morocco on the recruitment of Moroccan workforce for the needs of the Belgian economy. In 2014, the commemoration of the 50th anniversary and the celebration of all immigrations and of living together takes place.

Migration and the issue of integration are the center of many public debates in Belgium and Europe. Problems rise about religious radicalism, discrimination, unemployment and rejection are within a society profoundly influenced by the diversity of origins of the individuals who compose it. In the context of respect for other cultures, the vast majority of Belgians (86%) think that people from different cultural backgrounds, political or religious should have the same rights and the same opportunities to participate in public life. In their view, the cultural and religious diversity is important for the prosperity of their society. However, it should also be noted that (46%) of Belgians consider cultural and religious diversity as a threat to the stability of society (Chart 17.3).

Indeed, if a lot of difficulties of specific social integration of living together are reported, the promotion of cultural diversity for creating wealth and the development of information and collaboration networks within the Belgian society deserve to be accentuated. Identity recovery of migrants and youth immigrants in a context of cultural diversity is an essential action in a country where diverse cultural expressions coexist. Starting from their own identity resources, cultural actors of foreign origin can develop various strategies to circumvent the obstacles

Chart 17.3

Views about political, cultural and religious diversity in Belgium



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).

and reach a valuable expression. Cooperation projects between young Belgians and young immigrants help to deconstruct mutual stereotypes. A significant challenge in these projects is to ensure that a wide public has access and is not limited to the public already aware of the cause of diversity. It is therefore necessary at any cost to make collaborations with the mass media.

The projected image on SEM countries and their history demonstrates the dominance of an exotic vision tinted by prejudice due to certain ignorance and a distinct lack of information. This finding highlights the need for a critical and dynamic work on diversity and equality in the field of learning and media to raise awareness, provoke thought and action, and to strengthen the deep mutual knowledge of Euro-Mediterranean countries.

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