

The city of the 21st century will be intercultural or it will not be*

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Euro-Mediterranean cities have always been spaces for intercultural interaction. Aliki Moschis-Gauguet argues that the current outflow of immigrants, cultural and religious diversity in the region, if correctly managed, could be seen as a competitive advantage. The author maintains that exchanges among cities facing common challenges should be supported and that the connection should be made across crucial areas for social development including education, art and creativity, civil society and the management of migrant populations and refugees.

In the Euro-Mediterranean region intercultural interactions have historically happened principally at the local level – cities have always been spaces of encounter for people with a variety of cultural backgrounds, particularly around the shores of the Mediterranean. Globalization and the rising of human movements in the region have accelerated this process. In an increasingly urbanized Euro-Mediterranean zone, cities offer opportunities for positive intercultural dialogue but also carry challenges and threats.

In 2015 alone, more than a million migrants and refugees crossed into Europe, sparking a crisis as countries struggled to cope with an unprecedented influx of peoples from different ethnic, cultural, linguistic and religious backgrounds seeking a better future. The conflict in Syria continues to be by far the biggest driver of migration, creating among other things a division in the EU over how best to deal with resettling people. Europe was totally unprepared to handle the overwhelming situation with disproportionate burden being borne primarily by the ‘gate’ countries – Greece,

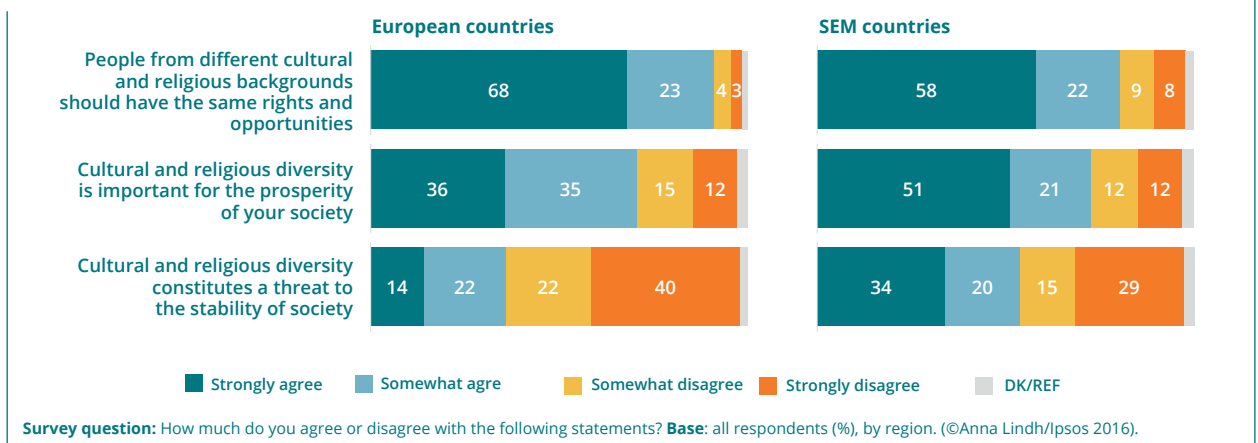
Spain, Italy – already highly affected by their own economic crises. This explosive mixture of economic recession and refugees feeds xenophobia and racism leading to the rise of nationalism and extremist parties.

In this dramatically challenging environment the Anna Lindh Foundation (ALF), as the leading institution in the Euro-Mediterranean region for the promotion of intercultural dialogue and understanding, has a major role to assume in accelerating and scaling-up actions in support of intercultural cities.

Cities as laboratories for cross-cultural fertilization

According to the Anna Lindh/Ipsos Intercultural Trends Survey’s findings, a large majority of citizens both in Europe and in the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean countries (SEM), consider cultural and religious diversity as an important asset for their society and, if correctly managed, a source of prosperity and a competitive advantage: 71% of the Survey respondents in Europe and

Chart 5.1
Perceptions about religious and cultural diversity



72% of them in the SEM agree that cultural and religious diversity is important for the prosperity of the society.

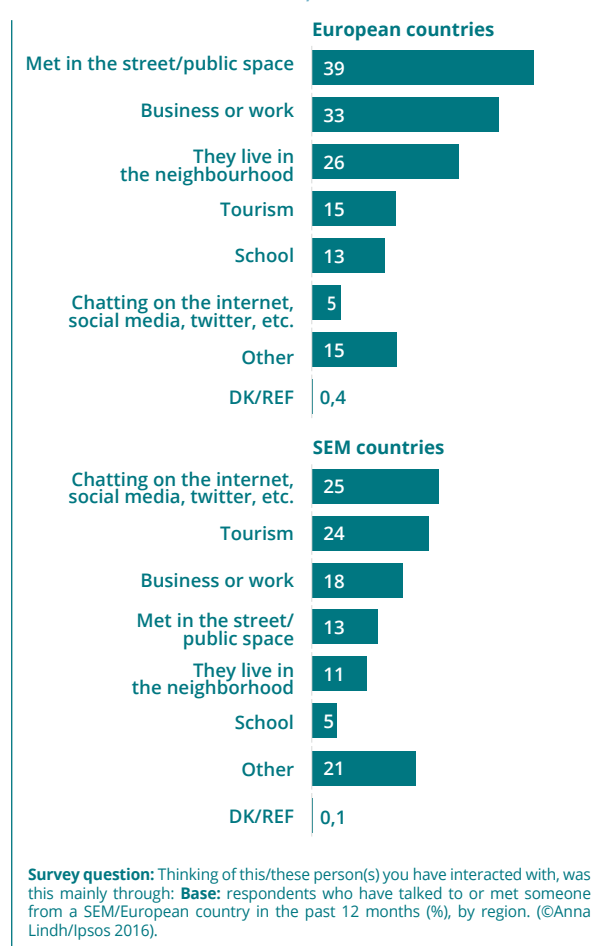
At the same time they recognize that, if unmanaged, diversity may constitute a threat to the stability and social cohesion of the community. A polarized society with racism and xenophobia paralyses its vital forces, suffocates its potential and dynamics and damages its economic and cultural performances.

Recognizing the merits of diversity, citizens from both sides of the Mediterranean seek in a large majority equal opportunities and rights for people from different cultural and religious backgrounds (91% of respondents in Europe and 80% in SEM) (Chart 5.1). This requires all stakeholders (city authorities, educational institutions, private sector and civil society) to ensure equal access to services and goods and to increase opportunities for interaction between diverse groups of the population.

Cities are traditionally ideal laboratories for cross-cultural fertilization. As demonstrated by the answers to the Survey, in Europe, people from different social and religious backgrounds interact primarily in the public space, their neighborhood, at work (39% of the European respondents have met people from SEM in the street/public spaces, 33% at work, and 26% in the residential neighborhoods), while for SEM countries the internet is one of the most mentioned method for intercultural interaction (25% of the respondents Chart 5.2). At the same time, the Survey also underlines the importance attributed to art and creativity by a large majority of people as the universal language capable of transcending cultural, religious and language barriers. Art provides the seeds of a genuine understanding of the other, which is a precondition to any peaceful coexistence (82% among both the European and the SEM respondents think that the promotion of organisation of multi-cultural events is an efficient action for helping people to live better in a multi-cultural environment)..

The Survey's findings in relation to the public space as privileged space for cross-cultural encounters, and to art as a major tool for intercultural dialogue lead to the conclusion that municipalities, by combining those two elements, – public space and art – have an excellent tool to bridge social, cultural and ethnic gaps. Therefore they are encouraged to create public spaces that are open and attractive for all citizens including those from diverse cultural background and to facilitate interaction and common projects. Local authorities are urged to use culture as an immediate tool to raise awareness and interest of large audiences towards other communities in the region and to offer concrete examples of dialogue through artistic expressions. Examples can range from, among others, inviting schools and associations of different backgrounds to 'adopt' a public park, artists of

Chart 5.2 Cross-cultural encounters, method of interaction



minority groups to perform in a historic site or to decorate a public square with joint art work. Municipalities may establish the month of diversity with all communities presenting their culture and traditions and interacting. Finally, decision makers should acknowledge the role of the artistic community as essential in reinforcing and enlarging the sense of belonging to a common region.

These measures, some of which are also included in the Council of Europe/European Commission Intercultural Cities programme (ICC), are only a small sample of a large range of actions to be adopted by local authorities desiring to 'bond' their diverse populations, and transform them into cohesive societies equipped to successfully respond to multiple challenges and obstacles..

In light of the Survey's findings regarding the importance of urban environment in cross-cultural interaction, the ALF should intensify its action in favor of intercultural cities by: encouraging the twinning of intercultural cities facing common challenges; multiplying exchanges, transnational cooperation and intercultural encounters in all sectors and activities of the involved cities; supporting capacity building and the transfer of know-how between local and regional bodies of the different countries of

the Mediterranean; intensifying networking among intercultural cities of the Euro-Mediterranean region; working in close cooperation with all international and regional organisations and networks already active in the field of intercultural cities in order to avoid overlapping actions; establishing a prestigious Euro-Mediterranean Capital of Dialogue Award.

Education, creativity, civil society and diversity management are the key

The connection among intercultural cities should be made across crucial areas for social development including education, art and creativity, civil society and management of migrant populations and refugees.

Education at all levels has the privileged position to ‘cultivate’ cross-cultural understanding, solidarity and respect of the other. As demonstrated by the results of the Survey, there is a high degree of tolerance in schools for children from a different cultural and religious background – both in European and SEM countries. The Survey equally underlines that respect to diversity is mostly efficient if taught in schools from an early age and that young people appear as most eager to connect and communicate beyond borders. Taking into consideration the above findings, it is strongly recommended to encourage the extension of the Erasmus programme to the Euro-Mediterranean region to support student exchanges. It is also important to encourage school twinning and common educational projects related to mutual perceptions, shared history, collective memory, basic understanding of other religions from the two shores of the Mediterranean.

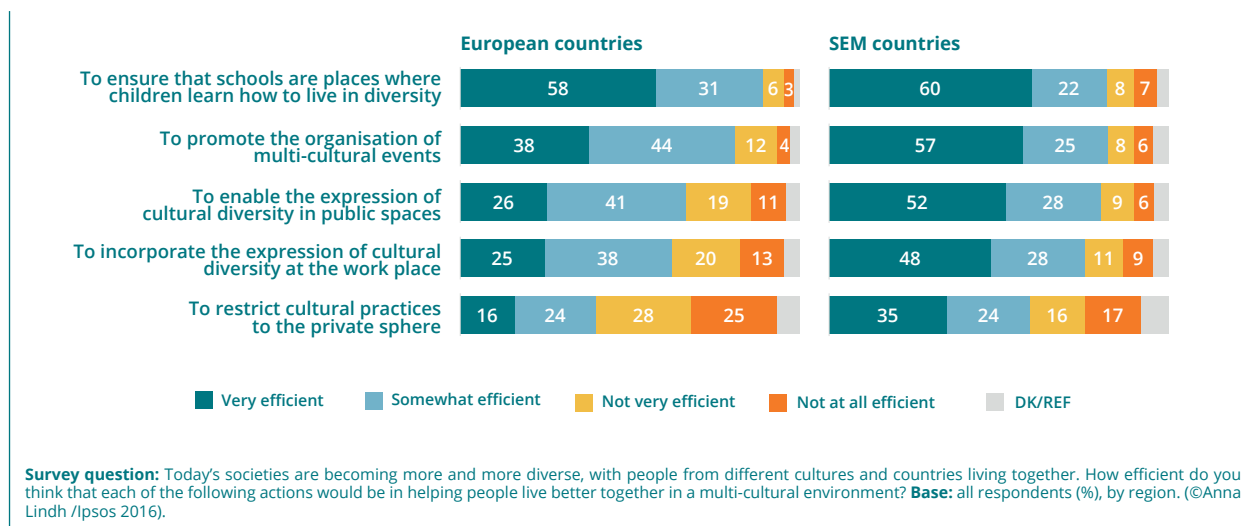
For civil society, it is recommended to pioneer a Social Erasmus programme, taking the positive experience of the Erasmus programme to the civil society and

facilitating exchanges among all actors of civil society, internships and volunteer work (for 73% of European and 81% of SEM respondents, exchange programmes involving people from across the Mediterranean can be an efficient way to tackle conflict and radicalization in the region). It is equally important to ensure access to intercultural opportunities for people not usually exposed to the cross-cultural encounter such as in rural areas.

In the field of art and creativity, it is crucial to work towards increasing artistic mobility both for artists and artworks and to enhance diversity in the cultural offer in cities through transnational cooperation. It is equally important to transfer knowhow and to widen access to and participation in intercultural projects. Finally art and creativity can be used to facilitate integration, acceptance of the difference, and healing of post-war trauma for refugees and immigrants (77% of Europeans and 81% of SEM consider the enabling the cultural expression of diversity in public spaces can contribute to better living in multi-cultural societies) (Chart 5.3).

On migration, taking into consideration throughout the questions of the Survey the number of people who confirmed having links in other countries of the region, it is obvious that the ‘human dimension’ must be at the core of Euro-Mediterranean relations (28% of the European respondents have relatives or friends in the SEM countries, while 72% of the SEM respondents have relatives or friends in the European countries). As such, it is important to acknowledge immigrants as a ‘cultural bridge’ – as agents of dialogue, raising cultural awareness between communities around the Mediterranean and enhancing knowledge of the migrant communities about their countries of origin and their capacity to share information with the rest of society. It is equally important to exchange good practices in public

Chart 5.3 Actions that can help people live better together in multicultural environments



services dealing with minorities groups, for example dealing with Roma community or with refugees, especially in cities facing major problems due to the influx of refugees such as small insular cities as in case of Mytilene in the island of Lesbos, Kos or Lampedusa.

Euro-Mediterranean Capital of Dialogue Award

Multicultural cities, with successful intercultural policies, should be acknowledged for their contribution, praised for their achievements, used as a reference to others, and rewarded adequately. This is precisely the purpose of the establishment of the Euro-Mediterranean Capital of Dialogue Award (EMCD).

In a most turbulent period for humanity, driven by a clash of 'ignorances', the title must be conceived as the ultimate acknowledgement from leading international institutions to a city's efforts to value diversity and promote cross-cultural understanding in compliance with human rights and international conventions. Inspired by the European Capital of Culture, the EMCD award, while crowning a city for its achievements and long term strategy on diversity, it will also stimulate, motivate and urge other cities to adopt similar policies and a common vision for a future of shared stability, growth and social cohesion in the region.

For the elaboration of the EMCD award, the Anna Lindh Foundation should establish cooperation with other international institutions with long established experience in the support of intercultural cities such as the European Commission, the Council of Europe and UNESCO.

A proposal for the setting up of the award could be developed along the following lines: the title of the Euro-Mediterranean Capital of Dialogue could be awarded every two years to four cities of the 42 ALF member states (North Europe, South Europe, Middle East, North Africa). Through this title the Anna Lindh Foundation aims to: ensure the direct involvement of local/regional authorities in the implementation of intercultural policies based on human rights and shared values as defined by ALF, the UN and the Council of Europe; mobilize and optimize all possible local and regional human and material resources including media and press; engage and unite citizens together including minority groups and refugees taking pride of their city as a Capital of Dialogue; promote networking among the awarded cities and activate exchanges and twinning therefore encouraging mobility of people, transfer of good practices and capacity building; achieve wide dissemination and visibility of all the core messages and values of the ALF in all Mediterranean societies and increase outreach and impact in the fields of strategic importance for the Foundation.

In the coming years the ALF should intensify its efforts to support intercultural cities and help them to build upon their diversity, realize their potential, fuel their creativity and generate new models of economic development therefore designing a future of stability and shared prosperity for the region.

Cities naturally provide the environment for cross-cultural fertilization, contributing to the emergence of a shared Mediterranean identity and to the awakening of the Mediterranean soul. Intercultural cities have been the power and pride of Mediterranean's past – they should be the beacon of its future.

*The title of this article paraphrases the sentence attributed to André Malraux: "The 21st century will be spiritual or it will not be"

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