

Italian hospitality in the face of rising migratory flows

Khalid CHAOUKI

Khalid Chaouki notices the increase in the percentage of Italian respondents who think that the Mediterranean region is strongly characterised by instability and conflict compared to 2012 and to the rest of the surveyed European countries. Nevertheless, the author also explains that Italian respondents are more prone to accept diversity, recognise the potential gains of Euro-Mediterranean cooperation and emphasises the role of schools as spaces to stimulate dialogue and knowledge especially in light of the increased migratory waves.

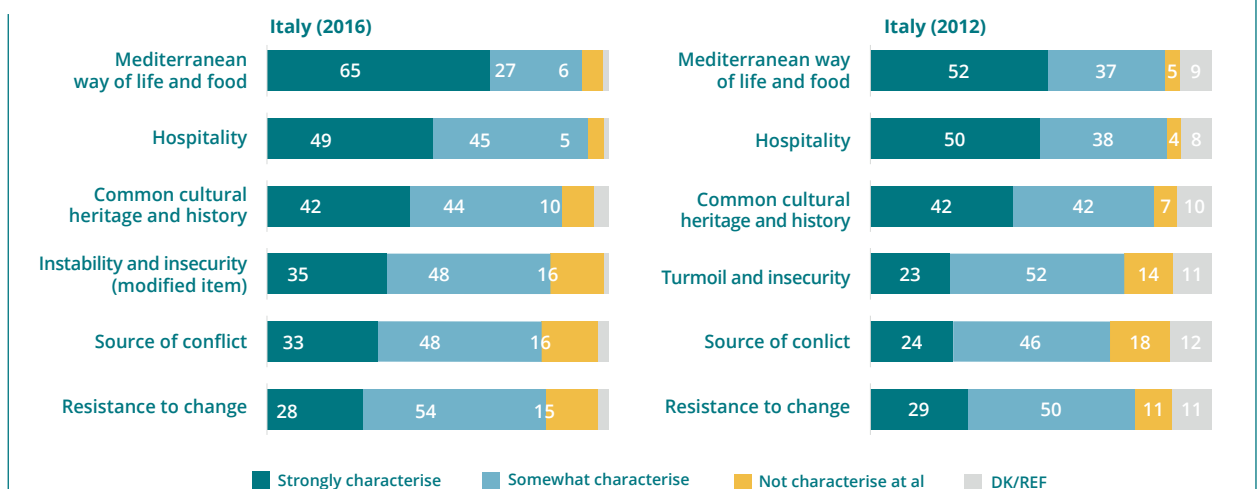
The Romans called the Mediterranean ‘Mare Nostrum’ — they defined it in this way to reaffirm their imperialistic will and their desire to extend their empire further southward and across the Mediterranean Sea. After two thousand years this scenario has changed profoundly and instead of a unique political unity, we see how the two shores of the Mediterranean are no longer united under one power, but have fallen apart in a series of independent states. In recent years, the two shores of the Mediterranean are going through complex times – tough for different reasons – and the solution does not seem to be at hand. The Mediterranean region undergoes new conflicts that require, more than ever, more effective and coordinated responses by the international community to work on the restoration of peace and socio-economic development in the whole region.

Italians are more aware than ever of this reality, and the Anna Lindh/Ipsos Intercultural Trends Survey shows

an increase, compared to 2012, in the percentage of respondents in Italy who think that the Mediterranean region is strongly characterised by instability and turmoil (from 23% in 2012 to 35% in 2016, and compared to 26% on average across the EU countries surveyed in 2016) and should be seen as a source of conflict (from 24% in 2012 to 33% in 2016, and compared to 25% on average across the EU countries surveyed) (Chart 18.1).

It is the job of everyone to find solutions to this crisis that is now ongoing for several years and to keep the channels of dialogue and communication open between the southern and northern shores of the Mediterranean. Compared to other European people interviewed in the Anna Lindh/Ipsos Survey, Italians are more inclined to be convinced of the potential gains of Euro-Mediterranean cooperation especially in relation to the promotion of more gender equality, education opportunities and respect for cultural diversity and prevention of extremism. Between

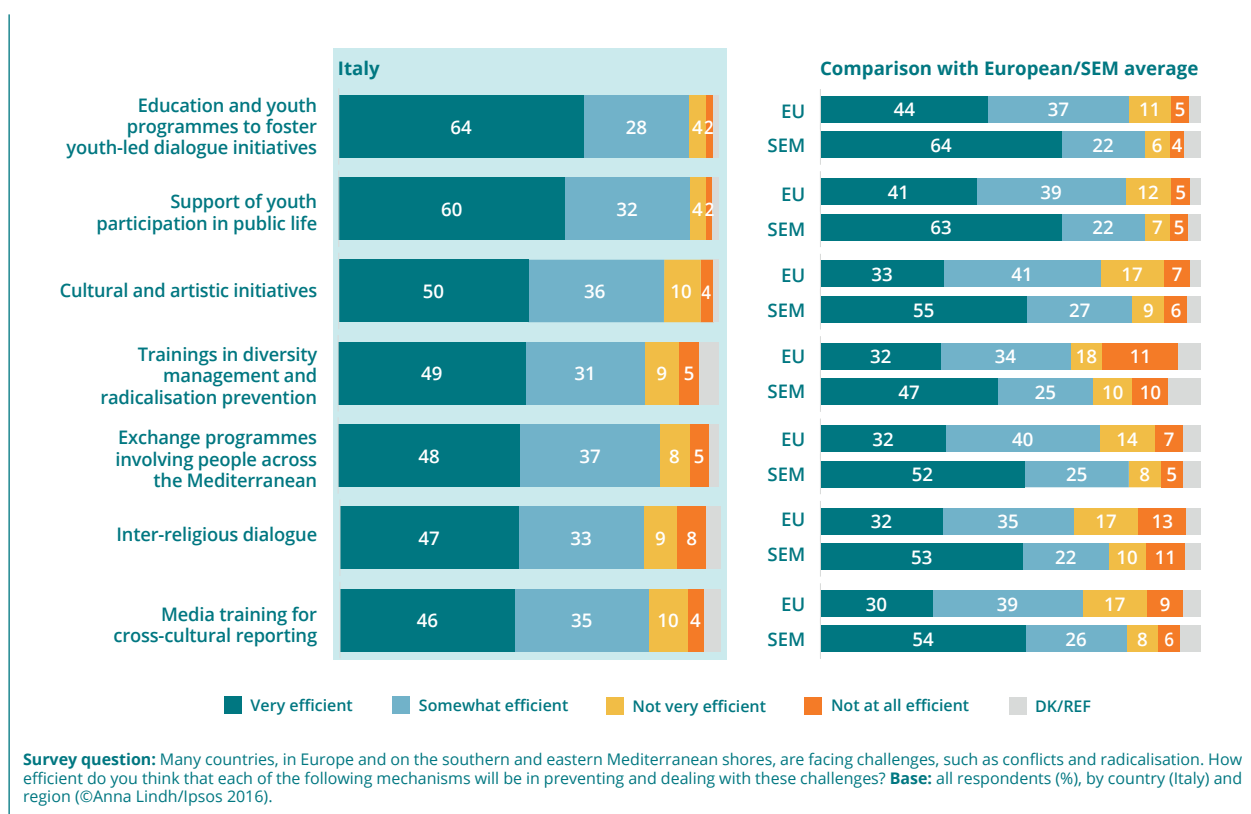
Chart 18.1 Italians' views about what characterises the Mediterranean region



Survey question: Different people have different thoughts about what the Mediterranean region represents. I will read out a set of ideas and images; please tell me if you think these characterise the Mediterranean region strongly, somewhat or not at all. **Base:** all respondents (%), European countries, by age group (©Anna Lindh/Ipsos 2016).

Chart 18.2

Italians' views about the efficiency of mechanisms to prevent and deal with conflicts and radicalisation



the data gathered in 2012 and 2016, we also observe an important increase among Italians in the belief that the Euro-Mediterranean project can bring gains to the populations in the region.

Peace in the Mediterranean region is the safest foundation for building a society based on respect for diversity and for guaranteeing a culture and education that focus on childhood and children's needs. Education is indeed the most powerful weapon against any kind of radicalisation but also against Islamophobia, because it promotes a sense of cohesion and collective growth within a horizon of shared values. The Anna Lindh/Ipsos Survey finds that 64% of respondents in Italy, compared to a European average of 44%, consider education and youth-lead initiatives an efficient way to tackle and prevent radicalisation. Respondents in Italy also believe in the value of youth participation in public life (60% think this is an efficient tool) and in the value of cultural and artistic initiatives (50%) when fighting radicalisation (Chart 18.2).

It is clear now that violent radicalisation is the result of ignorance and poverty; two factors that prevent us from imagining a future and that favour a spiral of violence and fear that we now have to interrupt. Poverty, unemployment (especially youth unemployment), corruption, social exclusion and inequality are the root causes of violent radicalisation. These phenomena concern us because we see that they are gaining ground and especially

affect younger generations, posing a serious threat to the security of people and the stability of countries.

For this reason, I think it is necessary to develop shared strategies to prevent violent radicalisation. The strategy we have to develop must be global but also specific, because it will have to take into account the particular conditions of each country. In this regard, I believe that cooperation between the states to the south and the north of the Mediterranean plays a central role. Economically, the two sides of the Mediterranean have long been more interconnected than most people might think (it is enough to think of the many European companies – and above all Italian ones – operating in North Africa, building infrastructure, schools and hospitals, and creating employment in the field). This may also be an explanation of high level of interest that Italians have, compared to their European counterparts, in news and information about cultural life and lifestyle in southern and eastern Mediterranean countries (35% vs. an average across the EU countries surveyed of 28%), about the political situation in these countries (31% vs. 28% respectively) and their economic conditions (26% vs. 23% respectively).

In this context, cooperation means building bridges of dialogue and exchanges of know-how, sharing common values of respect for human rights and cultural differences, and finally, establishing the foundation for

a healthy Mediterranean economy that considers youth employment as a value and an asset to preserve. This is because a satisfied and accomplished young person is someone that we have managed to keep away from desperation, which often leads to radicalisation. I believe that it is from young people that the future of Mediterranean societies will start again. They are structurally more open to the understanding of other cultures, they are more interconnected, and able to confront serenely with peers from other countries by putting aside prejudice. It is therefore a task of the younger generations to build an integrated society, capable of ending wars and conflicts, enhancing work and guaranteeing workers' rights.

But all of this this can only be accomplished by overcoming fears and ideological flaws, and by practicing a constant and conscious dialogue. The conflicts we have witnessed in recent years, from the Arab Uprisings to the Syria Civil War (that unfortunately still creates victims), have caused a massive exodus of people to Europe. We are talking about a serious humanitarian crisis of enormous proportions, an emergency that has mainly affected countries bordering the Mediterranean Sea that are already burdened by the migratory consequences of previous conflicts, and that have to deal with these situations nearing collapse, often without receiving adequate economic and logistical support.

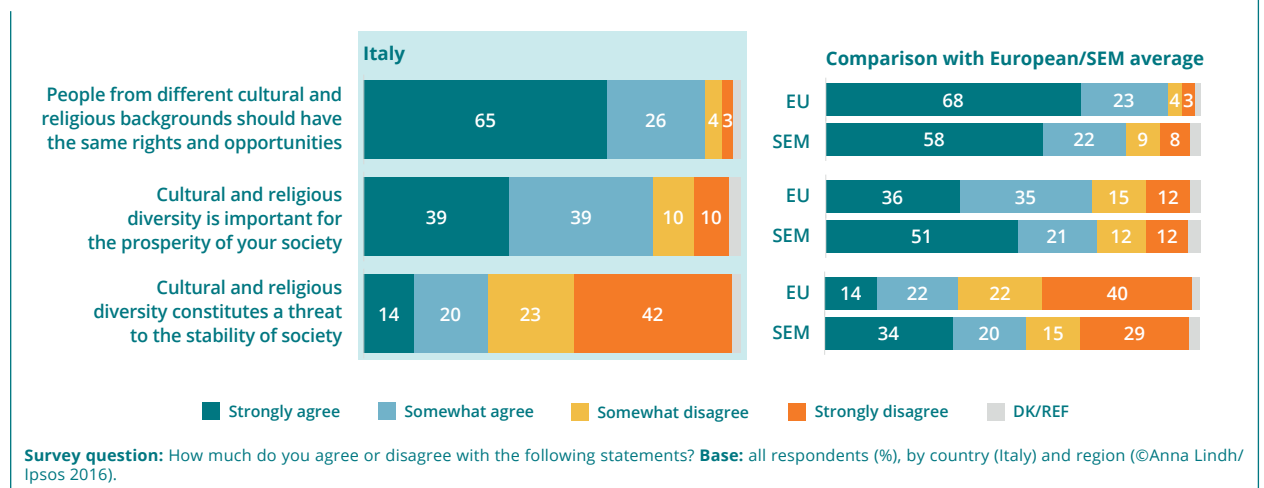
Since 18 October 2013, Italy has been at the forefront with the 'Mare Nostrum operation'; this has been the largest humanitarian rescue operation ever carried out by a government and continued until 31 October 2014. The operation included personnel as well as sea and air assets of the Navy, Air Force, Carabinieri, Financial Police, Harbour Masters Corps, Coast Guard, personnel of the Italian Red Cross military corps and of the Ministry of the Interior and State Police. The Italian Navy conducted 558 interventions in one year, rescuing 100,250 refugees and immigrants, seizing six ships and

arresting 728 human traffickers. Respondents in Italy associated the Mediterranean region first and foremost with migration issues, and this association was far more commonly made by Italians than by other Europeans respondents (59% vs. 44%).

Many of the rescued people applied for political asylum in Italy and we are now gambling on their integration into the Italian civil fabric. As a result of the higher number of migrants arriving in Italy, there is an increase in the number of Italians who have interacted with people from the southern or eastern shore of the Mediterranean (SEM) in the past 12 months compared to 2012 (65% in 2016 vs. 44% in 2012). These encounters happen mainly in public places (55%), in the neighbourhood (27%) and through business (26%). Although 29% of respondents who talked or met someone from a SEM country say their views about these people have not changed as a consequence of this encounter, 23% report a change into a positive direction and only 3% into a negative direction. According to the respondents interviewed, the main barriers to cross-cultural encounters are cultural and linguistic, and relate to embedded stereotypes. To overcome these barriers, structured and effective integration policies are needed. These people first need to feel secure and then learn the Italian language as the first and most important vehicle for integration.

The Anna Lindh/Ipsos Survey provides a positive picture of the propensity of Italians to accept diversity in society and in their personal sphere. Indeed, we register that the primary value that Italian parents wish to pass on to their children is the respect for people from other cultures (69% of respondents in Italy select this value out of the six values presented to them; an increase of 4% points in the importance of this value compared to 2012). Furthermore, a large majority of respondents in Italy agree that cultural and religious minorities should have the same rights and that cultural diversity is a source of

Chart 18.3
Perceptions about religious and cultural diversity in Italy



prosperity for the Italian society (Chart 18.3). Although one in three Italians thinks diversity can be a threat to the stability of their society, a larger share (42%) strongly objects to this view. Even when looking at the personal sphere, Italians show a high level of acceptance of other cultures whether it is at the workplace, in their neighbourhood, in the classrooms of their children or in their family when someone marries a person with another cultural background.

Italy still has to work hard to encourage coexistence of different cultures. At the moment, schools are the main place where children, born in Italy by foreign parents, learn our language and the rules of living together while studying subjects such as mathematics, geography and grammar. It is in schools that children learn to be citizens capable of respecting the differences and specificities of each and every one; it is teachers who give them the tools necessary to overcome stereotypes and prejudice in the name of real equality. The vast majority of Italians consider that ensuring that schools are places where children learn how to live in diversity is an effective way to help people better live together in a multi-cultural environment. Our country must increasingly support and invest in schools that teach children to recognise diversity and to respect each other's cultural identity by considering it as a resource.

The Mediterranean as a region characterised by its hospitality

It is clear from the Anna Lindh/Ipsos Survey that there is widespread consensus that the Mediterranean region is strongly characterised by its lifestyle and food. This is not only an element that unites us but makes us unique in the world. The importance we attach to the choice of fresh ingredients in the preparation of meals is an integral part of our being Mediterranean. Olive oil, for example, is the basis of both the Italian and Arabic culinary traditions and is a very strong element of the Mediterranean identity. The olive tree is a Mediterranean tree that grows well in Italy as in Greece, Spain, Tunisia and Palestine; the quality of the oil that the Mediterranean region produces is recognised all over the world, and our oil is one of the most important export products. It is also fully embodies the Mediterranean tradition of welcoming the other: this is a golden rule, not a written rule, but very important in the culture and tradition of the countries on the southern shore of the Mediterranean – a rule that the European countries are rediscovering, especially in recent years due to recent migratory waves (47% of European respondents see hospitality as a strong characteristic of the region as opposed to just 5% who state that the region is not at all characterised by its hospitality). Welcoming a stranger at your home, making it a place for a traveller, offering shelter to those who are passing through are part of a distinctive trait of what we can call Mediterranean. It is

a great virtue that relies on trust and openness to the other, passed on from generation to generation.

These are elements of hope, because the Mediterranean identity is a mosaic of stories, habits, religions and different colours, but also the fruit of common roots. Strong roots that allow us to recognise we are alike even in diversity, strong roots that we have to tell and share as much as possible because they are an antidote to extremism and the temptation to want to be right at all times and impose our own reasons. The Mediterranean is strong in diversity, we teach young people the value of pluralism to build solid and peaceful communities, united in the common values of respect and appreciation of differences.

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