

The Media and Intercultural Understanding: Challenges and Responses

A Euro-Mediterranean Conference

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Organised by the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the European Commission and the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, under the German Presidency of the European Union

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One of the central tenets of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership is the promotion of a dialogue of cultures between the EU and Southern Mediterranean countries. Efforts are constantly being made to improve the Euro-Mediterranean dimension of intercultural communication. This reflects a greater need, on both sides of the Mediterranean, for mutual understanding where immigration and other aspects of free movement lead to significant non-indigenous populations. The presence of large expatriate communities in Europe and the increasing flow to, and activities of Europeans in, Partner countries have added new dimensions to the discussions. In addition, economic and societal tensions, as well as unsettled political conflicts, are constant challenges to fostering a climate where dialogue, mutual acceptance and understanding can exist.

Mainstream media has been recognised as a key cross-over point for intercultural exchange and a primary vehicle for promoting intercultural awareness and understanding. But, have they helped or hindered an open and fair debate? Have they assisted in the fight against prejudice and bias, or rather provoked intolerance and racism?

And what is the role and responsibility of governments, media owners/publishers, regulatory authorities, etc. in the management of news, reporting and debate? Where are the borders between free expression and intolerance that can either inform or inflame elements of intercultural understanding? Who decides these limits?

Media professionals engaged in the *Euromed and the Media* initiative have touched repeatedly on these questions in recognition of the need for greater understanding between different cultures, identifying both the dangers of deterioration and opportunities for improvement. The seminar, jointly organised by the German Presidency of the EU, the European Commission and the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, and in consultation with Euro-Mediterranean partners, will focus on these topics in terms of their impact on media operations and will seek to move from discussion to an identification of needs and proposal of actions, within and outside the media, that could assist practitioners at all levels.

Objective

The opening public plenary session of the seminar gives policy-makers and media practitioners the opportunity to discuss together their perceptions of the difficulties faced in ensuring that intercultural communication is positive rather than negative; they will also be able to suggest ways in which it could be improved. This joint discussion will be followed by internal workshops, in which representatives of the media from North and South will be asked to identify the challenges they face in communicating across different cultures and to offer responses to those challenges.

It is anticipated that the discussions and workshops will touch on a number of themes that have arisen in *Euromed and the Media* seminars over the past eighteen months. Points to be considered in the working groups will, inter alia, cover the following:

- How different parties see the question of intercultural communication; how domestic commentators dealing with issues of multicultural societies have different perspectives from foreign correspondents;
- How those in conflict zones – both domestic and international – have different views from those in relatively stable environments. What is their ability to manage news for political ends?
- How partisan and biased journalism can compound negative stereo types and increase the polarisation of viewpoints leading to further alienation. What is the power of the media to de-escalate extremism and encourage constructive action?
- How basic matters such as education and accessibility to media have an impact on public perceptions.
- The impact of free media – both in the political sense and in terms of economic independence – on the quality of intercultural communication; whether a more diversified media landscape will improve matters or lead to greater divergence of opinion.
- How restrictions to reporting of taboo subjects and political intervention on styles of reporting can hinder mutual understanding; how individual media practitioners may indulge in self-censorship for political and economic reasons or simply through learned routine.
- The problems faced in reporting or representing the other – including lack of knowledge, ingrained prejudices in writers, editors and audiences, and the impact of nuances in language.
- While recognising the power of the media in the forming of public opinion, what is the role and potential impact of civil society in altering the management/coverage of distorted, biased or withheld information?

Programme structure and participants

The programme has been designed to accommodate both plenary/public and private working discussions. The opening plenary will be in the form of a public debate that can accommodate up to 200 participants, reflecting a cross-section of government, institutional, media and civil society interests. Efforts at geographic balance will be made in the participation from the two regions. On the institutional side, participants will include representatives from Government ministries, EU institutions and regulatory bodies. Invited media practitioners (journalists, editors, publishers) and organisations will include journalists and publishers associations, public broadcasters and private print media, Arab media in Europe, as well as journalist training institutions.

The opening session will lay the groundwork for the private discussions to follow by invited experts in the working group sessions which will be operational in outcome. The target of a maximum of 25 participants in each of four working groups allows for an appropriate cross-section of participants from both regions while still permitting concerted discussion. Working groups will have a Chair and a Rapporteur responsible for reporting back to plenary and summarising the working group's key proposals, which will in turn form the basis for the general Conference outcomes.

Output

Participants in the working groups will be able to discuss and propose responses at the global level and in EU and MED countries, both individually and in areas of joint cooperation. They will be asked to identify commonalities as well as differences between the two regions.

The working groups will be asked to propose statements of needs on key aspects of intercultural communication, addressed both to the media and those who work in it, and to wider interests that affect the operation of the media. The statements will be discussed in the plenary on the second day of the seminar and then reported in a document to be produced after the event. Actions will be taken to ensure that individual statements addressed to specific sectors will be passed to appropriate representatives of those sectors: response will be invited.

The statements will become part of the *Euromed and the Media* process, with responses and consequent actions monitored through the various formats in which the initiative carries on its work. Efforts will be made to ensure that the work of the seminar is noted – and, it is hoped, acted on - by those who have the potential to take concrete steps to address the matters raised.

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