

The Mediterranean in Emergency and Resistance: The Voice of the Region's Youth

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The Covid-19 crisis has shaken the foundations of the entire world and also of Mediterranean societies, adding to the situation of emergency which the Mediterranean was already experiencing and that affects different variables:

- Economic: characterised by growing economic and social inequalities between northern and southern countries in the region and within the countries themselves.
- Climatic and environmental: particularly concerns the Mediterranean Sea and has special impact on the advance of desertification.
- Social: particularly visible in the permanent migration flows worsened by the refugee crisis and by the thousands of dead in the deserts and the sea.
- Political: seen in citizens' growing crisis of trust in the representatives and the constant citizen demands for a change of regime.
- Cultural: revealed by the increasingly religious and identity tension between the peoples of the Mediterranean and the neighbouring areas.

This Mediterranean emergency is worsened by the active presence of new and old powers, intervening in different ways, and whose

extreme manifestation we see in the wars and armed conflicts in the region and neighbouring areas.

In 2010/11, in a first stage, the phenomenon of the so-called "Arab Spring" appeared and has developed differently in each country and with different outcomes. In a second stage, the one we are currently experiencing, the citizenry, from Algeria to Lebanon, continues to insist on their initial demands for freedom, dignity and social justice. Similar citizen uprisings, with their specificities, took place in Spain, France, Greece and Italy.

In this framework of Mediterranean emergency and citizen uprising, the Mediterranean Citizen's Assembly Foundation (AMCF) has been practising citizen diplomacy in its 10 years of life and has built a network of 29 citizen circles in 29 cities and 20 countries in the region. The AMCF has held eight major thematic meetings in different countries, the latter in November 2019 in Barcelona, in which the situation of youths in the Mediterranean was discussed. The meeting helped boost a major civil movement aimed at the political institutions so that they urgently place the issue of Mediterranean youth at the centre of their agendas. The event, which took place at the headquarters of the European Institute

of the Mediterranean (IEMed), had the support of the Government of Catalonia and Barcelona City Council and the presence of Euro-Mediterranean institutions such as the Parliamentary Assembly of the Mediterranean (PAM), the Euro-Mediterranean Local and Regional Assembly (ARLEM), the Economic and Social Committee (CESE) and the network of Mediterranean cities Medcités, among others.

The AMCF aims to contribute to the construction of a community of peoples of the Mediterranean, at a time when democracy and freedom – in reality, human rights – are at risk. Citizens' mistrust of their representatives is accompanied by the rise of extreme right movements that promote xenophobia, racism and authoritarian responses to the crises. For some time we have been witnessing a tectonic shift between an aged Europe and southern Mediterranean societies where youths are living with no future. A growing mistrust has developed, and fears have been taking root in the three shores while difficulties and unsympathetic and violent approaches to solving the problems have been growing. Mediterranean youths are born and grow up in a context of increasing inequalities and violence, without prospects, with a notable lack of professional opportunities, poor quality education and great difficulties for mobility. In recent years excluding nationalist policies have been emerging that on the northern shore result in border closures, Islamophobia has been increasing and security has taken priority over freedom to limit, if not violate, citizen rights.

We are, therefore, witnessing a process by which many human beings, mainly youths, have been forced to leave their countries of origin, seeking to find peace, work and a better way of life but what they often find is death, marginalisation and exclusion. The Covid-19 pandemic has worsened all the already existing symptoms. The lack of professional opportunities dashes the hopes of many Mediterranean

youths and the rate of youth unemployment is still very high, while they enter the labour world at an increasingly older age, which increases their dependency on the family and the demand for assistance policies. Youths have few prospects for stable and dignified work and therefore emigration seems inevitable.

There is nothing worse for a society than youths with no prospects. Some become radicalised, kill or commit suicide on behalf of an illusory ideal. Anything can happen in the generations that have grown up with endemic unemployment, marginalisation and suspicion. A part of the political system has begun to link the defence of a multicultural society with a loss of votes in elections, which poor and needier youths increasingly mistrust. Thus, electoral abstention from and disaffection with the democratic system is growing (Begag and Boussois, 2018).

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The AMCF argues that this danger cannot be combated with the conversion of the European Union into a fortress through the construction of more walls but rather by advancing towards unavoidable political and economic changes to meet citizens' and, particularly, youths' demands. It is also necessary to improve all the fields of relation and integration of the Mediterranean peoples.

On this path, it is essential to bring parliamentary, governmental and local diplomacy closer to the diplomacy practised by the citizenry, which we call citizen diplomacy. In this decade of AMCF action, this diplomacy has already generated a serious debate on the meaning of citizenry, the capacity to choose their representatives and the right to fully



8th meeting: "Mediterranean Youth, held in Barcelona on 7-10 November 2019 by the Mediterranean Citizen's Assembly Foundation.

participate in the development process of the representative public institutions.

The Commitment of Youth and the AMCF 8th Meeting

The millions of youths in the Mediterranean region best express the concern for what we have called the “Mediterranean emergency”. Their will to resist is related to disaffection with political systems as well as their demand for change. The Arab springs, the current uprisings in Beirut and Algiers, but also the events that have occurred outside the official field in Egypt or Morocco, or in France, Italy and Spain, where all kinds of spontaneous movements are emerging, are clear examples of the situations we have been describing. The uniqueness produced by the globalisation we are familiar with is expressed through the phenomenon of citizenry in movement not only in the Mediterranean but also in other parts of the world. Some examples are the popular mobilisations in Latin American countries such as Argentina, Uruguay, Chile, Peru, Brazil and Bolivia. Youth is the driving force of changes.

The 8th AMCF Meeting proposed a big debate on freedom, open to youths from the whole of the Mediterranean, public institutions and experts, regardless of origin, creed, culture or legal status. The meeting provided the unique opportunity to examine, diagnose and propose from many perspectives. Everything is recorded in the *Mediterranean Citizens' Assembly Foundation 8th Meeting: “Youth in the Mediterranean” Report* (AMCF, 2020), already published and disseminated among civil society and many public institutions present in the Mediterranean, as well as in the manifest drafted in the framework of the meeting.¹

Four Agorae to Search for New Horizons in the Mediterranean

For the Catalan institutions, the AMCF 8th Meeting “Youth in the Mediterranean” was linked with the activities that in 2020 were to be held on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the Barcelona Declaration, signed in 1995 with the aim of creating a Mediterranean region of peace, security and shared development. This commemoration, which will provide a re-reading of the Barcelona Process and of its successor, the Union for the Mediterranean, will mark the Mediterranean agenda for the next few years, calling for the role of citizenry and cities as international actors of dialogue, cooperation, social cohesion and coexistence in diversity.

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With 120 participants from 18 countries and 26 cities from the Mediterranean basin, the AMCF 8th Meeting dealt with four topics: culture and identity; economy, mobility and climate change; empowerment and citizenry; and new technologies and democracy. In the format of agorae, which enable a horizontal and plural debate, participants, with an average age of 34, along with experts and representatives of Euro-Mediterranean institutions and civil society organisations, established a diagnostic of the situation and suggested a range of proposals. The 8th Meeting concluded with the adoption of the Declaration of the AMCF Advisory Board and with the reading of the manifest prepared by the young participants in the event.

1. <http://www.fundacionacm.org/en/2019/11/18/statement-of-young-participants-in-the-8th-mca-foundation-meeting/>

Culture and Identity

In this agora, devoted to culture and identity, attention focused on the current situation of education. The privatisation of education, commonplaces and stereotypes that are repeated in the different Mediterranean countries and the evolution towards conservative education models based on values such as meritocracy were analysed. From the perspective of identity, participants noted that patriarchal roles are reproduced on both sides of the Mediterranean with serious consequences, such as gender violence. Moreover, the meeting condemned the growing racism, which has its counterpart in radicalisation, thereby revealing the failure of certain integration policies.

It is worth noting, moreover, the proposal to create a digital platform in radio or podcast format so that youths of different countries can share contents from a plural and free programme. It is also worth highlighting that the AMCF and similar organisations must create consultation tools on rights and freedoms, as well as programmes for the promotion and defence of human rights in the Mediterranean. Moreover, new technologies should help develop useful education tools that combat the existing commonplaces and based on a cross-over and coordinated knowledge in the Mediterranean.

Economy, Mobility and Climate Change

The debate focused on multisectoral issues such as the link between an economic neoliberal model, climate change and migrations. From this perspective, the proposals of the agora assert as an urgent issue the change towards a sustainable economy system, especially aimed at youths. To this end, more awareness-raising actions that in their turn

have an effect on the political agendas are proposed. Particularly notable in this respect is the activity promoted for some years by the AMCF, consisting of a joint and simultaneous action of cleaning Mediterranean beaches and coasts and that, in the last call of April 2019, had the participation of over 2,000 volunteers in nine countries of the region and 18 beaches. In this respect, it has been proposed that the Intereg Med programme should widen its field of action towards a raising of awareness clearly linked to climate change.

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In terms of mobility, clearly focused on the migration crisis, increasingly bigger not only because of the conflicts and economic inequalities but the climate emergency, the debate revealed the need for a change of the host and refugee model, particularly in the northern developed countries. The project launched by the AMCF along with the Amel Association International and SamuSocial, consisting of a Euro-Mediterranean solidarity movement with the people in exile, was reinvigorated. An initiative that already has the participation of over 100 organisations from the whole region and that pursues a change in the host policies, especially in terms of the criminalisation of solidarity.

Empowerment and Citizenry

The debates highlighted the difficulty of involving the youngest in political decision arenas. In particular wars, political and social instability and the enormous obstacles to having equitable access to public goods

were identified as the most relevant issues. All this greatly increases the inequality gap, the restriction of freedom of expression and future prospects.

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This agora proposes the creation, from the regional field, of an organisation devoted to the youth of the Mediterranean, with coordinated and permanent actions to foster the participation and social activism of millions of youths in the region, as well as to strengthen independent media outlets that shed light on the issue of youth, making it possible to have an effect on the political agendas.

New Technologies and Democracy

This agora began analysing the enormous potential of the new technologies for a sector of the population made up by digital natives throughout the region despite the unequal access to these tools. Some examples included some popular movements such as the citizen uprising in Lebanon or Algeria and the role of youths in search of changes towards more democratic and egalitarian societies. In both cases, social media has been the main coordination and communication tool. The agora proposed the creation of an online platform, as an observatory, that permanently monitors the issues concerning Mediterranean youths according to the four topics discussed in this forum. This digital outlet could be a continuation of the meeting to go on exploring the projects submitted and the development of new collaborative initiatives in depth.

The AMCF 8th Meeting has helped, therefore, to lay the foundations of a space of dia-

logue, proposal and action for future strategies in terms of youths in the region. And to assert the need for communication and cooperation spaces and the creation of specific initiatives by Mediterranean youths.

Message to the Youth of the Mediterranean by a 98-Year Old Young Man

At the AMCF we have been fortunate to have had the great thinker Edgar Morin with us over the last 10 years as a member of the Advisory Board of our organisation. Despite his desire to attend the 8th Meeting, in the end he was not well enough. Nevertheless, he sent us a very valuable audiovisual message aimed at the youths of the Mediterranean:

“Only fraternity and understanding can palliate the Mediterranean tragedy. In this respect, the civilisations of the Mediterranean will be able to go on because the ‘matria’ equals a land of destination where we are all citizens first and foremost. Do not forget that the citizen is someone who has acquired rights and duties, and is accountable for what he or she forms part of. If we consider this accountability, we will be able to overcome the conflicts, but only through exchange, fraternisation, meetings, friendship and understanding, with the aim of refloating the roots of different civilisations and regenerating them within a sea understood as our mother. We must understand that that there is a community of destiny, a human destiny under threat, a threat hanging over everybody, faced with which we the Mediterranean people should be the first to act. People living in the south should be the first. Why? Because in the north people have mainly developed the culture of calculation, of profit, of dominion over things, the anonymous world, a world only devoted to business and possession, while the south, which is being invaded

by the conception of the north, still advocates the great values such as freedom, autonomy of life, communication, extroversion and dialogue. It is worth recalling that dialogue emerged in the Mediterranean, in the dialogue of Socrates and Plato. We are the civilisation of dialogue because we need it by nature. Therefore I congratulate the AMCF for its courage and effort because, despite the adversity and difficulties, it continues to advocate the great Mediterranean spirit, threatened in the Mediterranean itself, and of which we must be spokespersons and defenders.”

Edgar Morin's message to the young people of the Mediterranean is encapsulated in a brief slogan: Reflect, learn from reality and resist!

A message of resistance by a 98-year “young man” who has extensively reflected on this concept because he himself was a member of the Resistance in a period of his life, during a black period of Europe. Seventy-five years later, Morin continues practising and exploring the concept of resistance as a basis to avoid other black periods like those we had in the past. Edgar Morin’s message to the young people of the Mediterranean is encapsulated in a brief slogan: Reflect, learn from reality and resist!

Let’s listen to him and search for a common future of Mediterranean integration, with all its diversity and together with its youths. Let’s work for a dignified, human and united Mediterranean.

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