

EUROPEAN POLICYBRIEF



REFLECTIONS ON MEDRESET

Research in MEDRESET has been pursued under two structural challenges, namely a structural inequality inherent in the consortium itself, as well as a rising revisionist (geo)political context. In light of these challenges, we advocate that the EU set up a Research Foundation for the Mediterranean and we also give recommendations for Horizon Europe.

April 2019

INTRODUCTION

This policy brief represents a reflection on pursuing research on Mediterranean relations – or relations between Europe, the Middle East and North Africa – in the framework of a Horizon 2020 project. With MEDRESET, the EU has been funding a project which has inquired into its own role in Mediterranean relations from a decentring and critical perspective (see last section of this brief on our research parameters), also giving us the possibility to present this critique to European policy makers. It has helped us to involve young researchers in this project and give a voice to the winner of our Young Writers Prize. Finally, it has also given us the opportunity to establish close working relationships and friendships between researchers in this project, which is perhaps one of its deepest structural impacts.

At the same time, we faced some challenges, a reflection on which might be useful for the European Research Council, the Research Executive Agency, as well as the European Commission and Parliament at large in view of Horizon Europe, as well as possible other research initiatives which this policy brief serves to provide recommendations for, on the basis of our experience.

The MEDRESET project has been conceived of in a *non-Eurocentric perspective* as reflected in its research design and methodology (Huber and Paciello 2016), as well as the running of the project itself, concerning the relationships within the consortium of 12 research institutions from the whole Mediterranean. While the Italian Istituto Affari Internazionali has been the coordinator of the project, three work packages were solely led by either a European or a Turkish partner, while the crucial four work packages which investigated into how local stakeholders imagine the Mediterranean have all been co-led by an Arab and a European partner. This procedure has been essential to ensure a *shared inquiry* into local perceptions, concerns and needs (Huber et al. 2018). Nonetheless, we still lived with *two structural challenges to our decentring approach*, namely a structural inequality inherent in the consortium itself, as well as a rising revisionist (geo)political context in which the consortium pursued its research activities.

The *structural inequality* is probably inherent in almost all research consortiums that include partners from the “Global North” and “Global South”.¹ It should be emphasized here that the most pertinent dividing line does not run between Europe and the Middle East/North Africa but between North European partners on the one hand, and partners in Southern Europe, the Middle East and North Africa, on the other. This manifests in three ways. Firstly, in the South, researchers frequently have worse contracts and thus a more stressful situation. Also, there is an enormous “*pay-gap*” in the consortium, whereby a Northern partner can receive multiple times more money than a Southern partner on the same research (tendentially one could speak of three “groups” whereby Egypt, Tunisia and Morocco get the least; Lebanon, Italy and Spain are somewhere in the middle; and the UK, France, Germany, etc. are on the top – note that these numbers also vary within countries depending on the type of research institution). This is, of course, in line with the average income rate differences per country; however, it does contribute to a cycle whereby the EU re-invests more money *in total* into the North than the South, and so reinforces the structural inequality in these partnerships. Secondly, the *administrative burden* on our partners in the South was significantly higher. While the EU pre-supposes a capable bureaucratic backstopping process familiar with the highly technocratic procedures of the EU’s research and development projects, this is often not the case and the researchers themselves had to take care of the overwhelming administrative work in addition to their research responsibilities. This additional work is not always factored into their wage. Furthermore, in some cases administrative challenges led to situations in which researchers paid their travel out of their own pocket or had to stay in different hotels. Thirdly, our partners in the South also had to go through *lengthy visa procedures* and longer travels as North–North flight connections are smoother than North–South and South–South. In conclusion, what we really appreciated is the commitment of our Southern partners to take part in these projects in light of all these constraints.

The *rising revisionist context* has posed another challenge to our decentring analysis. By this we refer to the massive move of authoritarian regimes against the ongoing democratic resistance in the Arab world (the Arab uprisings), as well as the growth of nationalist populism in Europe whose rhetoric is exclusionary, xenophobic and racist, aimed at immigrants, refugees, Muslims, Jews and other vulnerable communities. This rising revisionism on all sides of the Mediterranean also seeks to limit the civic and public space, including the space in which academics can move (as for example in the case of the Central European University which has been forced out of Hungary). We witnessed this impact in several respects. Firstly, our own approach to research had to become more “*securitized*”; as we requested ethics clearance for our project in April 2016, just few months after the heinous murder of the Italian researcher Giulio Regeni in Egypt, we needed to make our research as anonymous as possible to protect both researchers and involved stakeholders (which implies loss of the depth and authenticity of some data), and increase our security measures for field research. Some of our papers are published under pseudonyms to protect the authors, which is certainly not ideal in a publish-or-perish academic environment.

¹ The use of these terms, it should be noted, can be problematic. See Toshkov (2018).

Secondly, in some cases we had to divert case studies when we were denied research authorization by the relevant national authorities or when some of our partners could not travel anymore to countries for field work due to geopolitical crises. This is part of a larger trend where researchers are evading certain topics and case studies, thereby limiting themselves *ex ante*. Thirdly, ethics concerns were permanently present in this project where the benefit for local stakeholders on all shores of the Mediterranean was always key. Some ethic issues can, however, scarcely be anticipated. One of our partners had, for example, sought interviews with the Saudi consulate (which were not granted) in Istanbul shortly before the murder of the Saudi journalist Jamal Kashoggi there.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

A Research Foundation for the Mediterranean

We propose that the EU come forward with a research foundation for the Mediterranean whose aim should be to invest *into local research capacities in Southern Europe, the Middle East and North Africa*. For this purpose, this research foundation should provide scholarships for pursuing PhDs and postdocs in universities, as well as for individual research training and individual research grants for early-to-mid career researchers in universities, as well as other research institutions and think tanks. Thus, this is different from exchange programmes (which already exist in the form of Erasmus Mundus or Jean Monnet networks) and from support for already established scholars (such as Jean Monnet chairs or ERC grants), or indeed the Euromed University of Fes (which is only concentrated in one area of the Mediterranean), as it would aim at fostering *local research by local researchers in local institutions all across the Mediterranean*. The calls for application should be open to all disciplines but with a strong focus on the humanities, economics and social sciences, and not be limited topic-wise, to allow for research which is deemed important locally. It should also include funding for a strong mobility dimension to support travel within Europe and the Mediterranean, as well as for attending international conferences, including help for getting visas, etc. Such a foundation would be an excellent instrument to provide support to young people, higher education and research capacities/institutions in countries which have less means to invest in these, with positive effects on the Euro-Mediterranean area at large. Synergies with existing initiatives such as the Young Mediterranean Voices or EuroMeSCo could also be established.

Recommendations for Horizon Europe

In a context of rising revisionism it is important that research does not fall into the securitization trap. For example, the latest round of Horizon 2020 calls looked at the Middle East and North Africa exclusively through the lenses of migration and violent extremism. Migration itself, although prominent in H2020, has often been framed in a rigidly policy-oriented and sectoral way. A more comprehensive understanding of the interplay between migration (or lack of it) and economic social and political change in the Middle East and North Africa would be of great use also for more sustainable and productive governance.

We propose some issues we consider important for the larger region's future. Most importantly, we think that there should be more focus on:

- Socio-economic topics such as employment and environmental problems, as well as specific issues such as making the southern shore of the Mediterranean part of a regional value chain to improve its competitiveness;
- Resistance, social movements, the political inclusion of youth, and civil society, as well as their suppression; and
- A stronger gender dimension within a human rights and a social rights perspective.

Furthermore, we propose that Horizon 2020 should concretely include:

- A history-focused project on Europe's colonial past in the region and how it impacts on the relations until today, since Euro-Mediterranean relations are mainly looked at in an a-historical way today;²
- True comparative research on the whole spectrum of evolving political behaviour (state and non-state) in the Middle East, Europe and North Africa without applying predefined labels on it, including from a political economy perspective;
- Geopolitical challenges in Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa from a human security perspective; and
- Projects focused on roles played by the EU and its member states in various conflicts in the region (Palestine/Israel, Syria, Yemen, Libya, etc.).

Furthermore, in light of our experience outlined above, there are a couple of *administrative and project management issues* to be considered. Firstly, some degree of flexibility should be built into these projects, i.e., some wiggle room to adjust without huge manoeuvres. Secondly, it would be good if the respective EU delegations could regularly visit all local universities, to make them aware of the enormous benefit they can get from participating in Horizon Europe, as well as providing free and hands-on concrete training to administrative staff to help with the bureaucratic hurdles so that this burden does not fall on the shoulders of the researchers.

Thirdly, *ethics committees* are crucial and reflections on the do-no-harm principle, as well as fair benefit-sharing agreements, should constitute central obligatory components of the ethics plans of all Horizon Europe projects. Academics/researchers are not value- or bias-free in their work. As an example, parts of the literature on Euro-Mediterranean relations or on the Middle East is highly Euro-centric with its (1) narrow geopolitical conceptualization of the Mediterranean space driven by European economic and security interests; (2) application of European concepts onto the Mediterranean; and (3) marginalization of local perspectives and human security concerns/the needs of people in the region. The literature might thus be part of a broader discourse which justifies certain European policies, or makes other policies and the harm they are causing invisible. Researchers should therefore reflect on the *do-no-harm principle* in respect to their own research. Scholars in critical discourse analysis have pointed out that “a commitment to heterogeneity, plural and non-nationalist conceptions of political community or the principle of not inducing harm in foreign policy can serve as yardsticks in the interpretations of texts upon the condition that self-reflexivity (of the researcher's own normative assumptions) is constantly present throughout the analysis” (Aydın-Düzgüt 2014: 136). Besides reflecting on doing no harm, researchers should also think of *shared-benefit arrangements*. This should be guaranteed through the participation of institutions and/or researchers from the countries/communities being researched, in the consortium, in the advisory board and in the ethics committees. They should also be given centre stage in the final phases of the projects when policy recommendations are devised and presented in Brussels. Finally, there needs to be an *independent ethics oversight on Horizon Europe* projects themselves to ensure that all projects funded are in line with international law including international human rights and humanitarian law, as well as with European treaties, policies and guidelines. This issue has been raised, for example, by civil society organizations regarding research in the security sector, notably in the case of EU FP7 and Horizon 2020 funding for the Israeli military company Elbit Systems (European Parliament 2015).

RESEARCH PARAMETERS

MEDRESET has approached Mediterranean relations, and the EU role in them, from a decentring or non-Eurocentric perspective. Euro-centrism, as Sebastian Conrad and Shalini Randeria have pointed out, can be understood as the more or less explicit assumption that the general historical

² See also Anna Khakee on Colonialism, Core Values and Democracy, July 2018, <https://youtu.be/Q9kpVPcWWLo>.

development which is seen as characteristic for Western Europe and Northern America is a model according to which the histories and social formations of other societies can be measured and assessed (Conrad and Randeria 2013: 35). To move away from such an approach, our research design was in three phases based on an inductive methodology.

In a first phase, we de-constructed how the EU and its member states have constructed the Mediterranean – namely as a diverse geopolitical space, a dangerous space and a space crucial for European security and economic interests – in opposition to the self, represented as peaceful and united (Cebeci and Schumacher 2016). In a second phase, we re-constructed how the Mediterranean is imagined and practiced into being by other stakeholders, including other geopolitical powers (Ehteshami et al. 2017), an elite survey in nine countries (Görgülü and Dark Kahyaoğlu 2019), as well as recursive local stakeholder consultations on both shores of the Mediterranean (MEDRESET 2018a, 2018b, 2019). In the third phase, we are currently devising policy recommendations for specific policy areas and countries, as well as for EU policies at large.

PROJECT IDENTITY

PROJECT NAME	MEDRESET: A comprehensive, integrated and bottom-up approach to reset our understanding of the Mediterranean space, remap the region and reconstruct inclusive, responsive and flexible EU policies in it
COORDINATOR	Dr. Daniela Huber and Dr. Maria Cristina Paciello, Istituto Affari Internazionali, Rome, Italy, d.huber@iai.it , mc.paciello@iai.it
CONSORTIUM	American University of Beirut, Lebanon Arab Studies Institute – Research and Education Methodologies, Lebanon Barcelona Centre for International Affairs, Spain Cairo University, Faculty of Economics and Political Science, Egypt Center for Public Policy and Democracy Studies, Turkey College of Europe Natolin Campus, Poland El Manar University, Faculty of Law and Political Science, Tunisia Forum Internazionale ed Europeo di Ricerche sull’Immigrazione, Italy IPAG Business School, France Istituto Affari Internazionali, Italy University of Durham, UK University Moulay Ismail, Morocco
FUNDING SCHEME	Horizon 2020 Framework Programme for Research and Innovation – INT-06-2015: Re-invigorating the partnership between the two shores of the Mediterranean – grant agreement no. 693055
DURATION	April 2016 – August 2019 (41 months)
BUDGET	EU contribution: 2 497 million €
WEBSITE	http://www.medreset.eu
FOR MORE INFORMATION	Dr. Daniela Huber and Dr. Maria Cristina Paciello, Istituto Affari Internazionali, Rome, Italy, d.huber@iai.it , mc.paciello@iai.it

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