



★ NETWORKING EUROPEAN CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION

## **Participation Now! Citizenship Education and Democracy in Times of Change**

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### **Opening Address**

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*Dialogues on a new Euro-Mediterranean context: Mutual perceptions and narratives in the Mediterranean dialogue and their influence on recent developments*

Let me begin with a short observation regarding one of the talks we listened to yesterday. Claus Leggewie was talking about the big tasks ahead that will help Europe and the Mediterranean countries of the Middle East/North Africa to build up a bright future. Everything he said was very convincing; my question is why we actually don't do what seems obviously profitable for us.

Every journey begins with a first step, but every first step begins in our head. Much has been said about first and second steps but no attention has been paid so far to the existing mindset that determines whether we are ready for that first step. In my paper I want to get into this mindset, which is to my mind one of the main obstacles in the Euro-Mediterranean dialogue.

Current discussions within Europe about the boundaries of Europe and the place for North African and Middle Eastern countries in this context are very often based on ideas of a "historical reality" that determines our current situation and our understanding of history.

According to these historical narrations, there always was something called Europe and the Middle East/North Africa (i.e. the MENA region). These proclaimed entities are marked by historical, cultural and religious divisions and suggest that the project of the establishment of the European Union historically is a "natural" phenomenon as the Mediterranean is the natural border between Europe and the MENA region. But past and present challenge these notions.

It is important to note that these assumptions have consequences for our perception of today's reality. It is not without reason that leading European countries and their political experts reacted with astonishment to the recent political developments within the region. Rather, the events proved that many assumptions they had regarding civil society, the desire for democracy and a civil state in the region were wrong and that people in Tunisia, Egypt and other places shared their expectations of life. Narrations based on the essential divide between Europe and its neighbours were proven wrong. But our prejudices made it easier to ignore the voices from these countries demanding dignity and civil rights long before the recent revolutions, as a colleague from Tunisia mentioned yesterday. But still it seems that political Europe finds it hard to deal with the situation because it does not fit into the existing historical narrations.

These narrations are of course selective and constructed according to the function they should perform. One aim of my input is to show this contractedness has come about and to offer suggestions in regard to how these dividing narrations can be overcome.

One kind of European standard narration is the ideas that the Mediterranean is the southern border of Europe, dividing the Christian from the Islamic world. This may have been a historical reality for the last fifty years, but it is completely incorrect for the time before. Not only were central parts of the “European foundational heritage” like the Roman and Greek Empire located in the MENA region, but Islam has been highly prevalent in Spain, Italy, Malta, Greece and in parts of Central and South Eastern Europe for centuries. The Mediterranean was not the border of two peripheries, but a centre of its own in cultural, economic and political aspects.

These entanglements also continued during the time of European imperialism in the 19th and until the time of decolonization in the 20th century. In this era, the region was a centre for European economy, transport, and politics. And these developments resulted in interconnections. Not only did the Orient Express travel twice a week from Paris to Constantinople, but it went twice a week from Constantinople to Paris as well. The Suez Canal did not just connect Great Britain with India, but made the Mediterranean the centre of world trade. Generations of students and military officers studied in Europe and generations of European civil servants, military officers, journalists, teachers etc. spent their lives in this region. The argument that an imagined border could be an obstacle to a political, military or intellectual engagement with the region did not exist. Algeria was “France d’autre mer”, a French department.

The excluding argument known to us today was introduced when European states moved, after centuries of inner-European wars, to an inner European unity and removed their troops from the region. Now, old boundaries in Europe were opened on the basis of new collectivizing narrations, but also existing links were cut with this new idea of a European identity.

These narrations have fostered political ideas and boundaries and have created a barrier for the desires of the people of the region. While dictators in Eastern Europe were and are named as such because they are dictators in Europe, the same was and is not true for the MENA region. The dictators there were labelled dictators just moments before or after they were put down by the revolutions.

This hypocrisy becomes understandable if we situate it in narrations that stress a difference between the enlightened and democratic Europe, where dictatorships are not acceptable, and the MENA region, which is denied this heritage.

But historical arguments are functional and changeable. In our context, they don’t create a political reality. Rather, our ideas of a political reality create these historical narrations. The narratives are changeable; during the 19th century and up to the end of World War II, France was the sworn enemy of Germany – now the narration presents them as the natural axis of the European Union and offers historical arguments for this perceived reality.

As the old narratives offer no frame for the new situation, it is time to question European representations of the MENA region and develop visions and narrations for the future. The old framework of differentness prevents us from entering into new forms of partnership with actors in the region. Also, the old narrative creates obstacles to the raising of political and financial support for the first steps needed, as Claus Leggewie outlined yesterday.

History is always a construct of the present and aims for the future. New visions for the future therefore require a new history.

When it comes to the Euro-Mediterranean context, it is important to reveal mutual perceptions and narratives that influence our ideas of the future and to uncover their genesis and functions in order to free ourselves from a constructed historical burden and in order to offer counter-narrations that may already exist, but are not dominant for certain reasons.

All of you might have had a stroll through Cordoba just like I did. You had a look at the architecture, tasted local food, and listened to local music whose connections to North African countries are more obvious than to a Northern European country as, for example, Denmark. Still, Central European discourse tries to ignore that, stressing the narration of Europe as one unity and talking about fundamental divisions with what they call “the Muslim world”.



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Narratives of otherness/sameness determine these perceptions, but are not mutually shared. North Africa may see itself as attached to Southern Europe for obvious reasons, but these reasons might not be taken for valid on the other side.

The memories of one side may be the blind spots of the other. European historical memory tends to suppress the entanglements that reached across the Mediterranean whereas entanglements with Europe are quite vividly remembered in formerly colonized countries.

From the viewpoint of an academic being engaged at university, I want to offer some suggestions in regard to what can be done in order to prepare ourselves for the challenges of the future.

We have to become aware about how important historical narrations are for the perception of current events and the ways we can imagine our future. In order to make a European unification possible, textbooks had to be replaced, parts of our remembered history had to step back while others had to step from the back to the front. Humans don't just make history, they write it as well. Only if we know our history of prefigurations and prejudices can we react to them and shape the future without letting ourselves be ruled by a selective past. This requires a revision of our prejudices, which too often – unfortunately – are the basis of the political mindset. As an academic one should uncover them and look for ways to offer a critical approach towards the idea of history as something given and show that Euro-Mediterranean history offers multiple examples of close interconnections. But this has to take place in a scientific and academic framework and I still wait for the Euro-Mediterranean committees of historians to revise established narrations through academic dialogue and offer approaches to the past that help us to prepare for the tasks of the future.