


Youth and Cultural Narratives: Joint Actions Against Polarization & Hate Speech


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Inspiring **Knowledge** Driving **Action** Uniting **Cultures**

Executive Summary



Polarization and hate speech are eroding social cohesion across the Euro-Mediterranean region, particularly among youth exposed to fragmented cultural narratives. This paper argues that cultural storytelling, creative expression, and participatory education are central to rebuilding shared narratives grounded in inclusion and empathy. Drawing from the 2025 Anna Lindh Foundation Forum panel “Youth and Cultural Narratives: Joint Actions Against Polarization and Hate Speech”, it synthesises evidence and practice from both shores of the Mediterranean. The analysis highlights the transformative potential of youth-led cultural initiatives, identifies policy gaps, and concludes with operational recommendations to mainstream intercultural storytelling in Euro-Mediterranean youth and cultural policies.



Introduction



Across the Euro-Mediterranean region, societies are facing a growing crisis of trust and representation. In recent years, the multiplication of divisive media content, online hate speech, and identity-based polarisation has weakened social cohesion and democratic participation. The Anna Lindh Foundation's (ALF) Intercultural Trends Survey (2021) reports that over half of youth in the region perceive a decline in mutual trust between communities. This erosion is linked to the spread of exclusionary narratives—stories and symbols that define belonging in narrow, oppositional terms.

Cultural narratives matter because they shape collective meaning. When distorted by prejudice or misinformation, they legitimise discrimination and violence. Yet, as the UNESCO Global Report on Cultural Policies for Sustainable Development (2025) affirms, culture also holds the power to transform perceptions, enabling citizens to see diversity as enrichment rather than threat. The Euro-Mediterranean partnership, born from the Barcelona Process, has long recognised culture as a bridge for peace; however, its policy frameworks have often prioritised mobility and economy over cultural dialogue.

Young people stand at the frontline of this challenge. They are both the primary consumers and creators of digital content, and thus play a decisive role in shaping the narratives circulating within their communities. When empowered, youth can reimagine collective identities through arts, media, and civic engagement. When marginalised, they risk becoming either targets or agents of hate.

The ALF Forum 2025 panel [“Youth and Cultural Narratives: Joint Actions Against Polarization and Hate Speech”](#), coordinated by We Love Sousse (Tunisia) in partnership with cultural and youth experts from Ireland, Spain, Italy, and Tunisia, explored this duality. It examined how youth and cultural actors can collaboratively reshape public discourse, counter toxic narratives, and create inclusive spaces for intercultural dialogue. The discussion yielded both empirical insights and concrete strategies for policymakers.

This paper distils those outcomes and situates them within broader policy debates on interculturality, youth participation, and digital culture. It argues for a systemic approach that integrates cultural education, creative industries, and civic participation as tools against polarisation. The ultimate goal is to provide actionable guidance for Euro-Mediterranean institutions, governments, and civil-society organisations seeking to promote a shared narrative of coexistence.

Approach & Results

Methodological Approach

The analysis is informed by a hybrid methodology combining:

- **Field insights** from the ALF Forum 2025 interactive debate, attended by youth leaders, cultural practitioners, and educators from the Euro-Med region.
- **Comparative review** of policy documents and research produced by ALF, UNESCO, and the Council of Europe on hate speech, intercultural learning, and cultural participation.
- **Case observations** from four countries represented in the panel: Tunisia, Spain, Ireland, and Italy.

This triangulated approach ensures that findings reflect both lived experiences and policy evidence.

Key Findings

1. Fragmented cultural ecosystems fuel polarisation.

Participants underlined that in many Euro-Med contexts, cultural production remains centralised, elitist, and disconnected from local youth realities. In Tunisia and southern Europe, cultural institutions often prioritise heritage and tourism rather than contemporary, youth-driven creation. As a result, alternative narratives—particularly those from marginalised or peripheral areas—rarely reach mainstream media. This exclusion reinforces social divides and allows populist rhetoric to dominate public discourse.

2. Youth expression spaces are shrinking.

A recurring theme was the lack of sustained platforms for young people to express themselves creatively highlighted by Fiona Quinn (Coordinator with the Creative Ireland programme) during the panel. While initiatives such as Creative Ireland and the Spanish Youth Council promote participatory culture, they remain limited in scale and accessibility. In Tunisia, the NGO We Love Sousse and the Higher Institute of Music have demonstrated how local hubs can empower youth through music, debate, and digital storytelling. Yet, these models remain under-resourced and disconnected from national policy frameworks.

3. Education systems are not fully integrating intercultural competencies.

Panelists noted that formal education in both EU and MENA countries continues to rely on rigid curricula that rarely engage with diversity, dialogue, or media literacy. As observed by the Council of Europe's Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture (2018), schools often teach about culture, but not through culture. Non-formal education projects—such as IFM-SEI's human-rights programmes presented by Catterina Caterina Battilana during the panel—prove more effective in equipping youth with empathy and critical-thinking skills, but they lack structural recognition.

4. The digital sphere is a double-edged sword.

Social media amplifies both polarisation and creativity. While algorithms reward sensationalist and divisive content, they also allow young creators to bypass gatekeepers and build cross-border communities. Successful campaigns such as #NoHateSpeech or Mediterranean Youth Voices illustrate how online storytelling can foster solidarity. However, as Maria Arroyo (Spanish Youth Worker) highlighted, most grassroots creators operate without protection from digital harassment or access to funding.

5. Artistic and cultural narratives can humanise complex issues.

Fakher Hakima (Higher Institute of Music, Tunisia) emphasised the transformative role of art in translating conflict into dialogue. Through music, theatre, and performance, communities can process trauma and reclaim agency. The *Sounds of Solidarity* initiative in Sousse, for instance, used collaborative songwriting to address post-revolution polarisation. Similar artistic mediation approaches are emerging in Italy's community theatres and Spain's migrant storytelling workshops.

6. Cross-Mediterranean cooperation remains sporadic.

Despite the ALF's strong network, sustained exchange between northern and southern actors is still limited by administrative and funding barriers. Many participants called for flexible, small-grant mechanisms to support joint cultural productions and mobility schemes focused on narrative exchange.

Synthesis of Results

The evidence confirms that countering polarisation requires systemic investment in youth-led cultural ecosystems. When young people are trusted as narrative creators rather than beneficiaries, they generate authentic messages that resonate across borders. However, enabling this transformation demands coherent policy frameworks connecting education, culture, and digital governance.

Policy Implications & Recommendations

Policy Gaps and Challenges

The current Euro-Mediterranean policy landscape reflects fragmented governance of culture and youth participation. At EU level, programmes such as Creative Europe and Erasmus+ Youth provide valuable funding but often privilege mobility and institutional capacity over narrative impact. On the southern shore, national cultural strategies tend to be heritage-oriented, lacking provisions for creative citizenship or counter-hate initiatives.

Furthermore, hate-speech regulation remains reactive. While several countries have adopted online content laws, few address the root causes—economic precarity, media illiteracy, and loss of cultural agency. Without narrative alternatives, repressive approaches risk silencing rather than educating.

Policy Opportunities

The renewed EU-Southern Neighbourhood Agenda (2021) and the ALF 2025-2028 Strategy open new opportunities for integrating intercultural dialogue into policy frameworks. These include:

- The EU's commitment to strengthening people-to-people partnerships through culture and education.
- ALF's focus on youth, gender, and cities as cross-cutting priorities.
- Growing recognition among governments that social cohesion requires inclusive storytelling and creative participation.

Recommendations

Based on the panel insights and policy analysis, the following operational recommendations are proposed:

1. Mainstream intercultural storytelling in youth and education policies.

Governments and ministries of education should embed narrative literacy, cultural dialogue, and digital citizenship in formal and non-formal curricula. This includes partnerships between schools, cultural institutions, and NGOs to develop participatory modules using debate, theatre, and digital media as learning tools.

2. Create a Euro-Mediterranean 'Narratives for Peace' label.

The ALF and EU cultural agencies should co-establish a quality label recognising artistic and media projects that promote inclusion and counter hate speech. The label would foster cooperation among artists, educators, and activists, encouraging co-production and visibility across the region.

3. Establish a Mediterranean Fund for Youth Cultural Innovation.

To address the funding gap, a flexible small-grant mechanism should be created under the ALF or EU-Neighbourhood Instrument. It would support youth-led storytelling, music, or digital campaigns tackling polarisation. The fund should prioritise cross-border collaboration and accessibility for grassroots actors.

4. Strengthen youth access to local media ecosystems.

Media regulators and cultural ministries should reserve broadcasting slots or digital spaces for youth-produced content on inclusion and intercultural dialogue. Local radio, podcasts, and community television can serve as accessible platforms for young voices, especially in rural and underrepresented areas.

5. Integrate culture into counter-extremism and social-cohesion strategies.

National and regional authorities should recognise culture not merely as a leisure sector but as a preventive tool against radicalisation. Intercultural cultural programmes should be incorporated into national strategies on preventing violent extremism (PVE) and into municipal social-cohesion policies.

6. Foster capacity-building for cultural mediators.

A regional training framework should be launched to equip educators, artists, and youth workers with skills in intercultural facilitation, ethical storytelling, and conflict-sensitive communication. The training could build on the ALF's Young Mediterranean Voices methodology and UNESCO's Media and Information Literacy curriculum.

7. Promote research and data collection on cultural polarisation.

Euro-Med institutions should invest in comparative studies measuring the social impact of youth and cultural narratives. Regular monitoring, using both qualitative and digital-analytics tools, would inform evidence-based policymaking and funding allocation.

Expected Outcomes

If implemented, these measures could:

- Increase youth participation in cultural governance.
- Reduce online hate-speech incidents through proactive education.
- Strengthen cross-Mediterranean solidarity and trust.
- Position the ALF as a regional policy leader linking culture, youth, and peacebuilding.

Conclusion

Cultural narratives are the invisible architecture of societies—they define who belongs, who speaks, and whose experiences are validated. In an era marked by misinformation and digital fragmentation, reclaiming narrative space becomes a strategic necessity for peace and democracy.

The insights from the ALF Forum 2025 panel affirm that youth are not passive recipients of culture but active co-authors of Mediterranean identity. When equipped with intercultural competences and creative platforms, they can turn cultural diversity into a shared resource. The challenge is not a lack of talent or will, but the absence of coherent policy frameworks connecting cultural rights, education, and social inclusion.

This paper therefore calls on Euro-Mediterranean institutions, national governments, and civil-society networks to recognise storytelling as both a cultural and civic right. Policies must shift from funding isolated projects to nurturing ecosystems where youth can safely create, collaborate, and communicate across divides.

Building on the Anna Lindh Foundation's twenty years of experience, the next phase of Euro-Mediterranean cooperation should institutionalise intercultural storytelling as a cornerstone of regional policy. By doing so, the region can transform its cultural diversity from a source of tension into a foundation for solidarity and peace.

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