![grace - Gender and Cultures of Equality]

Policy Brief

Relationality as a Core Value of European Integration

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Executive Summary

Relationality (Erll 2018) is about creating the knowledge to enhance shared cultural core values between Europe and Syria. It refers to a process of studying public and political discourses—in this particular context, those discourses that surround the issues of Syrian conflict, migrants, and common European social and cultural values. Its objectives range from studying how such values are reflected in public and political discourses, to the way in which they can be translated into integration policies and initiatives (Ec.Europa.Eu 2016; European Commission 2017; European Council 2019)—from creating a conversation amongst common topics, to fostering a shared European social imaginary (Balibar 2016; Braidotti 2013; Passerini 2000; Ponzanesi & Blaagaard 2016). However, despite the transformative potential of relationality, its impact is undermined by challenges and resistances. This is important in the contemporary political landscape of Europe, where integration projects are under attack. This brief draws from recent research to present recommendations for addressing these current challenges and policy actions, potentially strengthening the impact of relationality as a tool for equality in Europe.

Background and Significance

Western European national policies have witnessed a recent shift, from multiculturalism to more restrictive integration regimes (Hoekstra 2015; Joppke 2007). However, in the public and the political spheres, both of these approaches to integration have been revealed as insufficient. For cases in which a more restrictive integration regime predominates, "culture" represents the national identity of the single state, conceptualising integration as a process of incorporation within that national identity. In the case of a multiculturalist integration strategy, "others" are allowed the space to represent themselves according to (amongst others) their nation of origin, religion, gender norms, or any combination thereof. However, despite progress in inclusive and dialogic cultural initiatives, divisions

persist. Findings from a mixed-method study—amongst others encompassing artists, activists, and participant observation, and covering five cultural initiatives operating mainly in the Netherlands—clarified the factors that hinder the impact of relationality as a tool to enhance shared cultural, mnemonic, political, and cultural core values between Europe and Syria. Further, the findings provide strategies that can augment the transformative potential thereof, expanding existing research on the topic (see Buikema 2012; Erll 2018; Verderi forthcoming, 2019).

On the **representational level,** regarding both the conflict in Syria and that of the new Syrian diaspora in Europe, research participants pointed to the fact that Syria has been mainly represented as a place of destruction and horror, whilst the political aspect of the initial uprising has been significantly under-narrated. They felt their **political agency was delegitimized,** whilst their identity was "flattened" to that of "refugees." Despite some inspirational initiatives, there were not enough public spaces in which to represent the initial aspirations of the Syrian uprising—those of peace and democratic transition.[1]

On the **socio-cultural level**, the issue of **division along religious fault lines** has not been sufficiently untangled in cultural initiatives. These divisions were exacerbated, not only by the Syrian government, but also by the Islamists during the war. Whilst some participants deflected the existence of such divisions, or preferred not to comment at all, others openly admitted their existence and stated that, for example, they would not take up a work position if they had to collaborate with individuals coming from the opposing side. Left unresolved, this issue is likely to resurface in the future.

On the **affective level**, there is a sense of **resentment towards the historical injustice** perpetrated in Syria. Activists and artists alike maintain that the demands of the uprising for a democratic transition were not adequately sustained. They also **contend the narrative of Europe as a space of uncontested democracy** vis à vis other places such as Syria, in which democracy is "yet to arrive." Critical observations on both new and old forms of inequality within Europe—for example with regard to forms of social isolation, indifference, and discrimination—were made by the activists and artists encountered during the research.

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[1] An example of a successful use of relationality in a cultural initiative is that of the historian Geert Mak with the event "Rethink Aleppo: The City Always Wins," held at Pakhuis De Zwijger, Amsterdam, on Liberation Day, May 5, 2016. Building on the Dutch city's memory of World War II, Mak related the memory of that moment to the ongoing conflict raging in Aleppo. The historian then drew a parallel between the common pasts of tolerance and collaboration of the two cities. Both Amsterdam and Aleppo have been, for many years, able to achieve coexistence in diversity, which allowed them to become important commercial centres. Another important example of relationality is the activist and artistic legacy of Fadwa Souleimane, a prominent figure of the Syrian civil uprising who died in exile in France in 2017 (see Verderi forthcoming).

Position Statement and Recommended Actions

In order to enhance the transformative impact of relationality as a tool of equality in Europe, it is necessary to address the current challenges that current cultural initiatives in relation to the Syrian diaspora are facing with appropriate policies and actions. Such initiatives, listed below, need to build on existing practices and strengthen shared cultural core values and a common social imaginary.

- **Ensure a political transition in Syria to a post-Asadist state.** The European Union has been committed to the implementation of policies on several fronts (European Council 2019). The process clearly goes beyond the scope of cultural practices. However, the implementation of cultural initiatives enables an understanding of the latent social tensions at work, as well as providing insights into the pasts of those involved and from there, finding political solutions.

- I**ncrease *funding of cultural initiatives that deal with themes that are of common interest and relevance for both the Syrian diaspora and the European publics.*** It is recommended *to address such themes especially through key words such as memory and justice. Memory and justice have the capacity to work as a space of equality within which each party can address the "other" via similarities rather than differences.*

- **Provide financial and institutional support to key figures and Syrian intellectuals in exile who are interested in engaging with the debate on Europe and Syria shared social imaginary.** These acknowledged, authoritative figures and their artistic and activist works provide valuable insights into the broader sentiments and attitudes of the community. Their involvement with initiatives concerning Europe helps to see beyond stereotypical representations of refugees whilst enhancing discussions based on common sensibilities.

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