

# MEDITERRANEAN SCHOLARLY COLLABORATION IN THE CONTEXT OF THE PANDEMIC

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The year 2020 was characterized by the outbreak of Covid-19 and also by the recognition of a close interconnectedness between societies, human fragility and resilience at the same time. The Euro-Mediterranean region is a prime example of such manifestations and a living laboratory reflecting the role of scholarly communities (our audience in this journal) in those developments.

The most obvious change we have witnessed in the year 2020 is a huge re-organisation of how we move, work and socialize. Most of our work, from teaching, researching and scholarly exchange has shifted to screens and online communication. Travel came to a standstill in the spring wave of the pandemic and has hardly resumed since.

The promulgation of the arrival of digital transformation seemed to materialise within weeks, presenting both opportunities and challenges for higher education and research, including in the endeavour to strengthen cooperation in the Euro-Mediterranean area. On the one hand, visiting lectures, webinars and participatory digital events have widened the opportunities for exchange and expanded the collaboration. Indeed, as most events taking place online are free, their accessibility is almost unlimited. In fact, for many of us, these opportunities have outperformed our capacities to follow them.

On the other hand, the challenge is that the capacities of professors and researchers to take part in the digital world differ. As is often the case, the emergent opportunities are widening the



gap in the use of online resources for individuals, institutions and countries, raising concerns of the formation of new form of inequality due to varying internet infrastructure and skill set of the faculty in how to use resources effectively. In addition, scholars have come to recognise the limits of a digital contact and its inability to replace the benefits of human presence, face to face discussions and networking. In part, this can be explained by the fact that much of online education or scientific event organisation and knowledge sharing is still not capitalizing entirely on the opportunities offered by the digital transformation. Yet in part, these limitations serve as reminders of the irreplaceable role of human contact in education and collaboration. We expect a great deal of new knowledge in this area, as important studies are emerging on the impact of online education.

Another key change we have witnessed is an enhanced visibility of and indeed, the need for science in public affairs. Scientists have come to the fore, as many governments established consultative expert groups to provide scientific advice to policy responses related to Covid-19, and entrusted them with the development of the vaccine. To deliver, the scientific and scholarly community has demonstrated unprecedented levels of urgency, and interdisciplinary and international collaboration at a speed never seen before. Some of this hard work was supported by large sums of rapidly mobilized funding, but in major part it was also fuelled by genuine enthusiasm. However, also here a large gap has appeared between the richer labs able to pursue excellence and those struggling to keep afloat with minimal resources. Focusing more on the long-term, research and innovation are presented as a means for economic recovery, but despite this evidence, the flow of actual investments into these sectors will vary widely across countries. A different challenge faced by the entire region, is to have scientific opinion (with all its shortcomings of uncertainty) heard and valued, and have it inform the policies in a transparent and democratic way, rather than abused to support impulsive or autocratic governance.

The very emergence of the pandemic, and the failure to have avoided it, points to a weakness within the scientific community - namely in convincing policymakers to act on evidence. The



scientific urge to respond to emergencies of climate change, biodiversity loss and various types of pollution continuously fails to materialise. The scientific community had cautioned of the transmission of a zoonotic disease, driven by increasing human intervention into wildlife habitats. The medical community had also warned of the ill-preparedness of the public health sectors for large-scale incidents. Similarly, it had been long known that long-term air pollution, or the heavy presence of PM10 and PM2.5 particles in the air, is known to lead to respiratory disease; during the Covid-19 pandemic, air pollution was proven as one decisive factor in the spread of the virus and the deaths it led to. Here, countries are surprisingly uniform: no one has escaped the bad scenarios becoming a reality while poor preparation cannot be linked just to material resources or human capital. Science invariably seems to struggle to act as a factor in decision-making. That should certainly change if we are to avoid bigger disasters, related to collapses of ecosystems or climate change, in a region that is infamous for putting heavy pressures on natural resources, including the Mediterranean Sea, and is also one of the fastest-warming regions in the world.

International co-operation in research, education and innovation offer countries a channel to strengthen both the quality of research and to foster solutions to common challenges, such as those outlined above, as well as to societal issues, such as migration and youth unemployment. The sharing of data, knowledge and research outputs have become more crucial than ever to overcome the global pandemic. Local or regional responses should take place with an awareness of embeddedness in global trends, while drawing on global knowledge.

One of the most stable, reliable and unchallenged ways of effective regional and international cooperation in research and education is through academic journals, especially when these are widely accessible. The International Journal of Euro-Mediterranean Studies (IJEMS) remains as relevant as ever in the transformations towards digital and sustainable societies of the future. At IJEMS, we stand to highlight the significance of regional cooperation (or lack thereof) in addressing topics of interest to the Euro-Mediterranean region. We showcase



the shared heritage, opportunities and challenges of the Euro-Mediterranean region, or highlight various starting points that require locally-specific responses. We stand to facilitate collaboration among scholars, established and emerging, towards sustainable societies. While this is a much shared academic effort, IJEMS's role is to channel this mission into the Euro-Mediterranean region, while sustaining the idea of this space as a region.

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Since the first issue, IJEMS has tied its objective unequivocally to open access. Today, open access journals are the rise like never before, but IJEMS has always remained loyal to this mission of providing full open access *without processing charges* for all authors. As such, we remove all practical barriers to cooperation to the prospective authors. We will continue to be dedicated to this principle even as we transition to the online submission system in early 2021, thanks to the continuous financial support by Euro-Mediterranean University (EMUNI). This attests to the importance that EMUNI ascribes to IJEMS as a central instrument of its mission – regional cooperation in higher education.

## JOURNAL DEVELOPMENTS

The present issue is the first to be prepared under the coordination of myself as the new Managing Editor of IJEMS, while retaining the existing Editorial Board. The issue has suffered from the effects of the epidemic in terms of time management regarding the majority of scholars, including the reviewers. The delay in the issue is a stark reminder of the absolutely invaluable role that reviewers play in the production of IJEMS. We are deeply grateful to the community of IJEMS reviewers and very much hopeful to expand it, as we keep on receiving manuscripts from an incredibly wide spectrum of disciplines. An additional level of complexity is posed by our editorial policy that also seeks to ensure a balance in regional representation in the review process, meaning that we try to have each manuscript evaluated by two reviewers from different parts of the region.

In identifying potential reviewers and the promotion of the journal to the new potential authors, we are particularly reliant



on our Advisory Board. Here too, we are very grateful to the active members of the Advisory Board who identify and seize opportunities for strengthening the journal. To ensure a flow of fresh ideas and enthusiasm, we will be revamping our Advisory Board in the first half of 2021 and are on the lookout for new individuals dedicated to the idea of Euro-Mediterranean regional cooperation. If you are one of them, please respond to our call to be issued in the coming months.

The journal has introduced a slight revision to the categories of articles it accepts. We continue providing key attention to scientific articles, but we also invite review articles that highlight events, reports or books that are significant for the cohesion of the region. We would like to make a special mention of a category that we have introduced to make the journal in its printed version more visually appealing. *Impression* aims at offering an opportunity for reflection over what the Euro-Mediterranean region is (about). We have solicited a photo for this first occasion, but look forward to receiving suggestions in the future.

The other major development of the journal will be a transition to an online system of submission. Due to the financial investment related to such a step, IJEMS is a latecomer to this standard practice of today's journals. It is thus with great expectations that we await this particular effect of digitisation on our own work. Online submission is meant to significantly facilitate the processing for the authors, editors and reviewers and we hope to have it work to make the journal even more attractive in the future.

## IN THIS ISSUE

This issue features, as usual, a variety of themes and disciplines. We start off with a mini symposium collection on the influence of the Mediterranean on music(al performances) in the geographical area of ex-Yugoslavia. We offer three articles presenting cross-cultural exchanges in musical traditions. The purpose of this collection, as per the proponent of the Symposium, Dr. Boštjan Udovič, was not only to provide an insight into cultural flows in selected countries of post-Yugoslavia (Serbia, Bosnia



and Herzegovina, Croatia and Slovenia), but also to show that they are part of a wider phenomenon- in this case, of shared heritage in the Mediterranean region, even if this is shared indirectly and with interruptions. The collection of articles revisits the notions of both the “Mediterranean” (expanding our gaze to the countries that are outside the typical explorations of the region) and “heritage” (as music and its impacts continue to undergo change).

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Lana Šehović Paćuka takes us to the Sarajevo of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the city transitioned from Ottoman Empire rule to that of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, which brought about also a new cultural context. Part of the change was the emergence *a la franca cafés*, in which female musicians took centre stage – presenting a contrast to a more conservative socio-cultural environment, in which women were expected to conform to more restrictive social norms.

The piece by Vesna Peno and Ivana Vesić shows how in the period after the dissolution of Yugoslavia, Serbian Orthodox Church music returned to the Byzantine chant. They note that while modern Serbia is not bordering the Mediterranean Sea, it remains embedded in the Mediterranean though Serbian new traditionalism, which seeks inspiration from the tradition of Byzantine cultural patterns.

Ivana Tomić Ferić and Vilena Vrbanić explore the musical sources and collections in Dalmatian museums. They demonstrate the connections between Croatian, Dalmatian and (Central)European musical culture, and propose to conceive Croatian musical culture not only as a mixture of Mediterranean, Dalmatian, Slavic, Italian, German and Hungarian cultural patterns, but also as an imprint of the interweaving of these influences.

Boštjan Udovič analyses the role of musical pieces on the building of statehood using the case of Slovenia. He explores the official anthem and the socially-constructed, unofficial anthems, in which certain musical figures from traditional Mediterranean musical culture are used. He sees a potential for the ‘state craft-ness’ of music, but only in so far as it has



the power to attract and to convince, i.e. when its legitimization is built bottom-up.

Following the musically-centred collection, the article by Eulália Santos and Fernando Oliveira Tavares takes us to the theme of financial literacy and financial risk. Their study explores the links between sociodemographic and professional variables, and financial education, arguing in favour of financial education in order to improve well-being.

Finally, the issue features a review summary of the Network of Mediterranean Experts on Climate and Environmental Change (MedECC) Report on drivers and consequences of climate and environmental change, written by Abed El Rahman Hassoun and colleagues. The report is the first-ever assessment of its kind focusing specifically on the Euro-Mediterranean region, and is the product of international collaboration among researchers. Since challenges in the environment are becoming as tangible as they can be with real socio-economic implications, the inclusion of a review with a heavy scientific base is justified in this journal, which has predominantly attracted contributions from the social sciences and humanities. We hope this review will inform and sensitise our readership about the scope of environmental change and, together with the rest of the articles in this issue, present reasons for continuous scholarly collaboration within this context.

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