

Press Release

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International research team laying the groundwork for a new youth organization in the Mediterranean

Press and Public Relations

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A new trinational research project is seeking to help reshape the Mediterranean as a region in which young people can come together to overcome the barriers that all too often keep them divided. The project – a collaboration between Saarland University and universities and cultural institutions in Tunis, Aix-en-Provence and Marseille – aims to confront the issues of youth isolation and prejudice through meaningful cooperation and interaction. Academics and young researchers across a range of disciplines are working to create a trans-Mediterranean organization that will encourage youth networking in the region and strengthen mutual respect and acceptance among young people. To realize this vision, the researchers are exploring and developing new culture and youth policy concepts. The project has received funding from the Franco-German Youth Office (FGYO).

The Mediterranean has always been a region in which the cultures of three continents have met and interacted. 'Today, Europe tends to view the Mediterranean as a region defined by conflict and confrontation – and European policies reflect this,' explained Markus Messling, who holds the Chair of Romance Literatures and Comparative Literary and Cultural Studies at Saarland University. 'Social inequality and social upheaval, environmental change and human migration are some of the many crises currently challenging the societies of the Mediterranean – a region in which the European Union and the states of the Maghreb are linked through a shared colonial history,' said Messling. And these crises have a human cost. There have been countless deaths as people strive to reach Europe; thousands have already drowned in the Mediterranean. Populists are stirring up fear and prejudice and are using the crisis to sow hatred and incite violence.

In an attempt to counter these developments through cooperation, collaboration and mutual understanding, Professor Messling has, together with Dr. Franck Hofmann (also Saarland University), established a project with other researchers from the universities of Saarland, Aix-Marseille, La Manouba and Mahmoud el Materi (Tunis) as well as from the Centre Franco-Allemand de Provence. The project entitled 'Penser la Méditerranée

ensemble – transmediterrane Jugendpolitik (Thinking the Mediterranean together – Trans-Mediterranean youth policy)' aims to promote and foster positive intercultural exchange between the youth of Europe and the countries of the southern Mediterranean. 'The Mediterranean is dissected by demarcation lines and regional conflict. We want young people to envision the Mediterranean as an open and accessible space. We want to work collaboratively to examine the Mediterranean as a space of cultural and human interaction and circulation,' said Messling, who recently secured funding for a Käte Hamburger Kolleg at Saarland University – a prestigious research institution that will examine and explore the cultural practices associated with reparations.

The Mediterranean project will take a true interdisciplinary approach that will see established academics from Tunisia, France and Germany working together with early-career researchers and students. 'Against a backdrop characterized by colonial history and the politics of identity, our goal is to lay the conceptual and political groundwork for a trans-Mediterranean youth organization,' explained Dr. Franck Hofmann, a comparative literature and cultural scholar at Saarland University who, together with Professor Messling, initiated the collaborative research project involving Aix-en-Provence, Marseille, Tunis and Saarbrücken.

Hofmann and Messling have already worked closely together on the earlier project 'Transmed! Rethinking the Mediterranean and European Consciousness' in which international scholars convened in Paris, Marseille, Naples, Lisbon, Tunis, Istanbul and Athens to discuss the crises in the Mediterranean as European crises and to seek answers to these challenges from the perspectives of social and cultural theory. It became apparent from these debates that there was a real need for new policies for the youth of the Mediterranean region. In 2013, the researchers published an open letter addressed to policy makers in which they proposed the formation of a trans-Mediterranean youth organization. In the new follow-up project, the research team has now been tasked with building this new youth organization from the ground up.

The researchers are now working collaboratively to explore what it means to rethink and reconceptualize the Mediterranean region from the vantage point of cultural and literary theory as well as from artistic, cinematic, historical, political, sociological and philosophical perspectives. Their aim is to shed light on the obstacles to such a reconceptualization, to understand the institutional and social architectures necessary for effective youth exchange activities and to determine which programmes are worthwhile. 'The task of the research group is to develop programme proposals and structural concepts that can be used for policies that will facilitate cooperative educational initiatives and fair and respectful youth exchange activities in the

Mediterranean region,' explained Azyza Deiab, who works in Professor Messling's department and is the project's academic coordinator. 'And once again, we will looking to engage closely with political actors from the education and international cultural policy sectors,' said Deiab. Conferences and workshops are also planned as part of the project.

The first conference was held in Tunis in 2023. In addition to a round table discussion on the subject 'La Méditerranée partagée : défis et opportunités pour un avenir commun' ('The shared Mediterranean: Challenges and opportunities for a common future') and a public screening and discussion of the film 'El Medestansi' ('The Disqualified'), the conference also provided a platform for political debate with representatives from the Tunisian Ministry of Youth and Sports. A meeting of the research group is planned for 2024 in Marseille.

The recently launched www.transmed-projekt.org project website aims to provide a platform for sharing ideas and for those interested in getting involved with the project. Researchers and students from all disciplines can use the platform to discuss their relationship with and their perspectives on the Mediterranean region and address what they consider to be the most pressing social, economic and political issues in their respective countries. The project will initially be structured around the three core thematic areas 'Borders and Circulation', 'Differences and Recognition' and 'Livelihoods and Sustainability'.



OFAJ
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The project has received funding from the research department of the Franco-German Youth Office (FGYO) initially for a period of three years.

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www.transmed-projekt.org

<https://www.uni-saarland.de/lehrstuhl/messling/forschung-aktivitaeten/penser-la-mediterranee-ensemble-transmediterrane-jugendpolitik.html>

A French, German and Arabic version of this press release can be found at

<https://www.uni-saarland.de/aktuell/transmediterranes-jugendwerk-29533.html>

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