

Press release

“Majority of Arab populations is critical of EU”

Study by the Cluster of Excellence analyses for the first time sceptical attitude of Arab populations towards the European Union– Much more scepticism than in Asia, Africa or Latin America – Major reason is rejection of external interference with domestic concerns – In twelve countries analysed in the study, critical image of EU is not rooted in their religion of Islam – Political scientists recommend: EU should not “act patronisingly” in the Arab region

Münster, 2 december 2016 (exc) According to a new study of the Cluster of Excellence “Religion and Politics”, the majority of people in Arab countries is critical of the European Union (EU). “In almost all of the countries included in the study, a minority of respondents – between 10 and 45 per cent – see the EU as positive”, says Prof. Dr. Bernd Schlipphak, political scientist from the Cluster of Excellence. “This sceptical attitude is a contrast to our earlier findings, according to which the EU appeals to more than 70 per cent of the population on average in countries in Latin America, Asia and sub-Saharan Africa.” According to the new study, one of the main reasons for the rejection of the EU in the Arab region is the fact that the majority of respondents refuses external interference. “The stronger the desire for national self-determination is among the population, not least after the Arab Spring, the more negative is the perception of the EU.” The acute desire for state sovereignty also has its roots in the colonial era, when Europeans exerted a great deal of influence on the region. “Religion, in contrast, plays a much lesser role for the scepticism towards the EU in countries influenced by Islam than has so far been assumed”, according to Prof. Schlipphak. “Our analyses indicate that the perception of the EU is not influenced by closeness to a religious leader.”

The Cluster of Excellence plans detailed studies about the influence of religion on the attitude towards the EU and other international organisations; for instance, about the communication of religious elites and about personal religiousness. According to the new study, other reasons for a critical attitude towards the EU among the Arab population are a lack of trust in other political institutions such as one’s own government, a critical attitude towards the USA, a negative assessment of one’s own country’s economic situation, and the lack of a cosmopolitan attitude of an individual respondent. The research project headed by Bernd Schlipphak was the first to analyse the reasons for the negative attitude towards the EU in the entire population of twelve Arab countries; so far, research had only assessed the views of elites to that end. The countries analysed were Jordan, Palestine, Lebanon, Egypt, Sudan, Algeria, Morocco, Yemen, Kuwait, Libya, Tunisia and Iraq.

EU should “take the sensitivities within the population seriously”

In the light of the research results, the political scientist recommends the EU to “take the sensitivities within the population seriously when it comes to the EU’s foreign-policy objectives in Arab countries”. Democratisation and liberalisation – which is also an important requirement for strong economic relations – can only “be achieved by supporting projects from the civil

society, that is to say, bottom-up and not top-down". The findings from the first empirical analysis of the Arab reception of the EU, which Schlipphak conducted together with his co-author and project collaborator Mujtaba Isani, were recently published in the renowned "Journal of Common Market Studies". The project team analysed the results of the representative "Arab Barometer" (AB) of 2013 and 2014, by means of which Princeton University, the University of Michigan and the Arab Reform Initiative collect data on the political attitudes in the Arab world.

Negative feelings towards one's own government are conferred to the EU

"In other regions of the world, economic expectations and trust in national political institutions influence the perception of international organisations. In Arab countries, it is also derived from the culturally rooted ideal of dignity", explains Prof. Schlipphak. "In regard to international perceptions, the ideational desire for individual and domestic self-determination is highly important." The majority of respondents indeed advocates international cooperation, but "they distinguish between self-determined intergovernmental cooperation and domestic lecturing by other countries and organisations".

As in other parts of the world, citizens in Arab countries also "transfer their feelings about the national political institutions they know to unknown international players". However, they have less trust in the political players of their country than other people in the world, according to Isani. "Thus, the EU is not considered a neutral alternative either." Moreover, research literature about the attitude of elites outside Europe shows that the EU "as an institution has a credibility deficit", adds Schlipphak. This is caused by a contradiction: The EU perceives itself as a "good power" while it is seen from the outside as an actor in international negotiations who is solely guided by its own interests. "In light of this, it would be problematic if the EU acted patronisingly by trying to impose measures to these countries."

The researchers attribute the strong desire for national sovereignty not only to colonial rule, but also to the support that authoritarian rulers received from Western states after World War II. "Today, the desire for self-determination is an integral part of the Arab political discourse, which has probably become even more important after the Arab Spring of 2011." At the same time, people feel united by a "pan-Arab identity", explains Mujtaba Isani. Research has shown that interferences by external players are uniformly rejected across borders. "The potential breach of the sovereignty of one Arab state alone affects the perception of the external player in the entire region."

Yet, the average assessment of the EU differs widely among the twelve different countries; the question as to how these differences may be explained remains open in the study. For example, only 11 per cent of Algerians but almost 60 per cent of Moroccans have positive feelings toward the EU. According to Schlipphak and Isani, further studies should therefore include the influence of realpolitik events and the relations of the individual countries to the EU as possible parameters. The Cluster of Excellence's study fills a research gap as the attitude of non-European communities towards the EU and other international organisations has so far barely been investigated. (ska/vvm)

Additional information about the study “Desire for Sovereignty” and its methods of analysis

The title of the study is “The Desire for Sovereignty – An Explanation of EU Attitudes in the Arab World”. It presents the first published results from the Cluster of Excellence’s project A2-24 “Foreign states and international organisations in Arab public perception” headed by Bernd Schlipphak. Political scientist Mujtaba Isani, project collaborator and member of the Cluster of Excellence’s Graduate School, is its co-author.

The authors drew on the survey data of waves 2 and 3 of the “Arab Barometer” for the study. Researchers all over the world use the barometer to analyse Arab attitudes on freedom, democracy and religion as well as national and international players. Methodologically, the Münster political scientists conducted an empirical regression analysis, which is used to reveal dependencies of different variables, such as the relationship between the perception of the EU and the desire for sovereignty or religion or economic considerations. The data sets used by the research team were surveys from 2013 and 2014, in which the “Arab Barometer” interviewed 14,809 people in the 12 countries listed above. In order to include the impact of the Arab Spring, the researchers added data from another barometer survey from 2010 and 2011. (ska/vvm)

Please note: Isani, Mujtaba and Schlipphak, Bernd (2016). The Desire for Sovereignty – An Explanation of EU Attitudes in the Arab World. Journal of Common Market Studies, DOI: 10.1111/jcms.12485. The article can be downloaded on payment of a fee: <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/jcms.12485/full>

Abstract of the results from the previous study on how the EU is perceived in other regions of the world: <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2013/06/13/public-opinion-outside-of-europe-is-generally-favourable-toward-the-eu-but-this-is-only-partly-due-to-the-eus-actions/>

Pictures: Prof. Dr. Bernd Schlipphak (photo: Benedikt Weischer)

Contact:

Viola van Melis, Centre for Research Communication
of the Cluster of Excellence “Religion and Politics”
Johannisstraße 1
48143 Münster
Phone: 0251/83-23376
religionundpolitik@uni-muenster.de, www.religion-und-politik.de

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