



MeCoDEM Final Report
Publishable Summary

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1a. Summary description

The project 'Media, Conflict and Democratisation' (MeCoDEM) investigates the interconnections between public communication and contentious politics during periods of regime transformation from authoritarian rule to a more democratic order. By taking a communication approach, the research contributes new knowledge to the understanding of conflicts in transitional societies. In this project, conflicts are understood as communication events whose dynamics and outcomes are shaped by the frames, narratives and interpretations that are used by different stakeholders – governments, civil society groups, media – to shape the public debate and to mobilise support.

The research programme is based on two key assumptions that provide the conceptual framework of the project:

- ***Democratisation frequently triggers conflicts between antagonistic groups, interests and world views.***

Contrary to the assumption that democracy acts as a mechanism for solving problems peacefully, democratic transitions often trigger conflicts between winners and losers of the transformation and frequently between dormant divisions that are mobilised in subsequent power struggles. Often, the notion of democracy itself becomes a focus of contestation, as different visions of the democratic future compete for domination. In these circumstances, limited institutional capacity and incomplete transitions foster popular disillusionment and discontent, with potentially negative consequences for the legitimacy and survival of the new democratic order.

- ***Contemporary democratisations take place in a media-abundant environment and are shaped by the 'media logics' of both traditional and new digital media.***

From a communication perspective, conflicts crystallise around contested interpretations of social conditions and events: what 'really' happened, who is to blame and what should be done to solve the conflict. Hence, the way in which conflicts are communicated, the words and images that are used and whose voices are privileged

have a profound impact on the dynamic of conflicts and their eventual outcome. To fully understand democratic transitions and the conflicts that accompany them we therefore have to move beyond the 'hardware' of institutional transformation and pay attention to the 'software' of communication cultures and processes, which by mobilising perceptions and identities determine what kind of political action is possible or not.

Technological innovations, like the internet and social media, and the proliferation of channels and platforms have opened up new spaces for communication, which provide dissident voices with a powerful mobilisation tool, but are also highly effective instruments for government propaganda and surveillance.

In this new media environment political actors - from protesters to governments - have to incorporate the media's logic of operation into their own strategies and organisational structures. Even though this process is not uniform across countries, we argue that democratisation conflicts are now highly mediated events. In the media-saturated environment of the 21st century, the ability to mobilise public opinion and to influence the course of politics depends to a large extent on the ability to exploit the technologies and agenda-setting power of a multitude of media outlets and platforms, both online and offline.

Through a suite of eight work packages, the research programme of MeCoDEM addresses the following questions:

- How do the media report on democratisation conflicts and is this likely to promote or prevent cooperation and reconciliation?
- How do journalists understand their own role in democratisation processes and the conflicts that accompany them?
- How do civil society groups communicate during conflicts and do their communication strategies enable conflict resolution?
- How do governments communicate with conflict parties, how responsive are they to the grievances of citizens?
- How do actors who are involved in conflicts use digital media, and do social media help to give voice to excluded groups?

- What is the understanding of democracy, its values and practices, and are these understandings contested between different actors?
- What are the strategies of media assistance organisations for developing media and journalism in transitional societies?

1b. Description of work performed

The MeCoDEM research programme follows a **comparative case study design** involving a set of 13 carefully selected conflict cases in four countries: Egypt, Kenya, Serbia and South Africa. These countries were chosen because they represent specific constellations in democratic development, from the stalled transition in Egypt to relative consolidation in South Africa, with Kenya and Serbia indicating democratic settings whose institutional and cultural foundations are still weak. In each of these four countries we investigate three conflict cases that are linked to democratisation, or the demand for democratic change. The selected cases represent specific types of democratisation conflicts:

- ‘Citizenship and collective identity’ conflicts revolve around issues of political, economic and social rights, inclusion and exclusions and questions of belonging;
- Conflicts over ‘control and distribution of power’ address issues of good governance and performance, alongside mechanisms of limiting power and representation;
- ‘Transitional justice’ relates to a society’s attempt to come to terms with the legacy of past human rights violations, persecution of dissidents and widespread injustice;
- ‘Electoral conflicts’ focus on elections as a major trigger for conflict and violence in transitional democracies.

The research programme of MeCoDEM pursues a **mixed-method approach** that combines quantitative and qualitative methods. The methods employed aim to capture both the content of communications during conflicts, and the strategies, perceptions and objectives of the actors who were involved in these conflicts.

The following data were collected during the course of the project:

Quantitative content analysis of media coverage

Quantitative content analysis was used to identify patterns of communication in the media coverage of the selected conflict cases. The codebook covers variables such as causal explanation of conflict, labelling of 'the other', value orientations and proposed solutions, conception of democracy, quality of reporting including bias, emotionality and polarisation.

In total, **5.458 news items** from newspapers and television programmes were coded across the four project countries.

Semi-structured interviews

We conducted semi-structured interviews with the key stakeholders who were involved in the selected conflict cases: journalists, civil society groups and political activists and government officials. Interviews covered how interviewees understand their own role in democratic transitions and during conflicts, their interpretation of the conflict, communication strategies and their evaluation of democracy.

In total, we conducted **267 interviews**, each lasting on average 1 hour and 8 minutes.

Social media analysis

To analyse large volumes of data generated on social media platforms (we focused on Twitter), an online platform – **Mecodify** – was created that enables researchers to extract, save, visualise and analyse social media data. The platform includes big data analytics as well as tools for in-depth qualitative analyses. The platform is available as open source resource from the project website (<http://www.mecodem.eu/mecodify/>).

Textual analysis

A broad range of documents was collected and archived for qualitative textual analysis, including media coverage, campaign material and images.

1c. Description of results and potential impacts

The main findings of the project highlight the complexity of public communication during democratisation conflicts:

- The democratisation of public communication opens up new spaces for voices that have been silenced under the old regime, but at the same time triggers and intensifies conflicts between competing values, interests and identity claims. Limited communication capacity of the actors involved is one of the reasons why these conflicts often result in civil violence.
- In transitional societies democracy itself is a contested concept. There is no shared understanding of the democratic future of the country and what this might entail. Research participants widely agree that neither the western model of journalism nor that of democracy can be adopted in a 1:1 fashion. But the alternatives remain vague and are prone to authoritarian captures.
- Mainstream media in transitional societies usually follow the dominant discourse of those in power. Even though in some countries the voices of citizens are represented on the media agenda, institutional opposition (political parties, interest groups) is largely absent in the media coverage.
- While journalists in transitional societies adopt the standard norms of western journalism, such as objectivity, detachment and the watchdog role, the role of the media in conflict situations shows that these norms can be counterproductive for conflict resolution and reconciliation. However, restrained reporting as part of concerted efforts to prevent the outbreak of violence can contribute to stabilisation, but bears the risk that journalism loses its credibility and autonomy.
- The relationship between civil society groups and the media is highly ambivalent. On the one hand, political activists rely on the media to mobilise public opinion; on the other hand, political activists often see the media as adversaries and part of the dominant power structure rather than allies.
- Current discourse overestimates the role of social media for citizen empowerment, as they are only one element of a broad range of communication tools employed by civil society actors. 'Nano media' like pamphlets, rallies and symbolic action as well as creative expressions remain important modes of communication, especially for poor and disadvantaged communities.
- Vernacular and digital media are an important forum for different groups to participate in the public discourse. But they are frequently the driver of polarisation and inter-group violence.
- The communication capacity of governments, both on national and local level, remains poor. Government actors continue to use a top-down propaganda model

when communicating with citizens. The lack of responsiveness and the inability to listen are one of the main factors that trigger and exacerbate conflicts.

A more detailed overview of findings can be found in the MeCoDEM Working paper series, available from the project website (<http://www.mecodem.eu/publications/working-papers/>).

From these findings the following conclusions can be drawn for media development and interventions to support emerging democracies:

- Scepticism about the applicability of western notions of journalism and democracy should be taken seriously. In many cases, challenging western models might be instrumentalised for political gains. However, contextualised solutions are essential for democratic practices to take roots in transitional societies.
- Media development should be understood as communication development including not only journalists, but a broad range of societal groups and government agencies who are involved in public communication. Journalists do not operate in a vacuum, and polarising communication of political parties inevitably permeates through the entire arena of public communication.
- In virtually all conflict situations the lack of a constructive communication culture of the actors involved exacerbates divisions and often triggers violence. Transitional countries need forums for dialogue to overcome a culture of zero-sum games. Forums can involve local spaces for deliberation, but also national media.
- Good governance includes responsiveness and the ability to listen to grievances not only during election times. Democratising the institutions of power should therefore also include strengthening the communication capacity of governments on all levels, from the local to the national.

