



THE IMPORTANCE OF TEACHING EUROPE'S PAST

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THE IMPORTANCE OF TEACHING EUROPE'S PAST

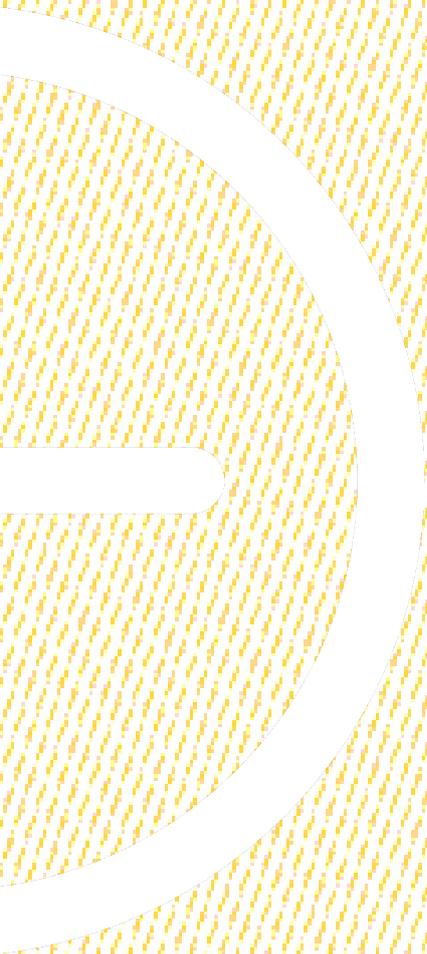
EVENT REPORT

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It matters how Europe teaches its past, and the importance of history teaching has been thrown into sharp focus by the emergence during the Covid pandemic of conspiracy theories and scapegoating of communities that echo the darker periods of Europe's past.

"Historians engage in very difficult forms of data to read, to reconstitute past thoughts, to understand our own times and anticipate our potential futures," says Professor Niall Ferguson.

This event report covers the conference 'History Education for a Democratic Europe', organised by the Observatory on History Teaching in Europe (OHTe).



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History at heart – Teaching Europe's past can protect its future

By Benjamin Fox | EURACTIV.com



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How to teach history across Europe, and how it can contribute to a vibrant democratic culture was the question at the heart of a two day annual conference 'History Education for a Democratic Europe' last week, organised by the Observatory on History Teaching in Europe (OHTE).

Panellists emphasised the need for history to be taught in ways which foster reconciliation within and between nations, avoiding prejudice, stereotypes, and biased thinking. History teaching must also go beyond one national perspective.

Established one year ago, the Observatory now has the support

of 17 member states across Europe. It aims to promote history teaching and improve the quality of teaching at all levels of education for young people in order to strengthen common European values.

"The long-term objective is to take stock of the state of history teaching in Europe", said Alain Lamassoure, the Chair of the OHTE's Governing Board.

The European Commission has announced that it will work with the Observatory and has pledged €1 million to support it. Commission Vice President, Margaritis Schinas, described the financial support as "a tangible sign of our confidence in your work".

"Learning about history should not be focused solely on events and words, but it should also teach about tolerance, forgiveness and openness between nations," said Marija Pejčinović Burić, Secretary General of the Council of Europe.

Even before the pandemic, European societies were wrestling with the teaching of Europe's legacy of world wars, as well as more controversial ethnic based conflicts, civil wars, recent transitions to democracy and colonialism.

However, the COVID-19 pandemic has amplified social problems which have created new tensions in the democratic culture of European

societies. The increased belief in conspiracy theories about the spread of COVID and vaccines, and the scapegoating of certain communities, are an eerie reminder of the narratives which drove conflicts that ripped Europe apart for much of the 20th century.

Stefania Giannini, assistant director general for education at UNESCO, described the “shadow pandemic: of racism, anti-Semitism and hatred which is polarising our societies”, and this and the role of teaching history

“What we teach and how we teach must be constantly updated,” she said, emphasising the need to “provide young people with the space and knowledge to question and engage responsively in debate,” she said, pointing to the emergence of ‘cancel culture’ as one of the modern examples of debate being shut down.

Jean Michel Blanquer, France’s national education minister, pointed to the murder last year of Samuel Paty, a French history teacher whose

murderer attributed the killing to Paty showing his class the cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed printed in the magazine Charlie Hebdo in a lesson on free speech.

“Ignorance of other people and cultures leads to mistrust and war,” added Giannini.

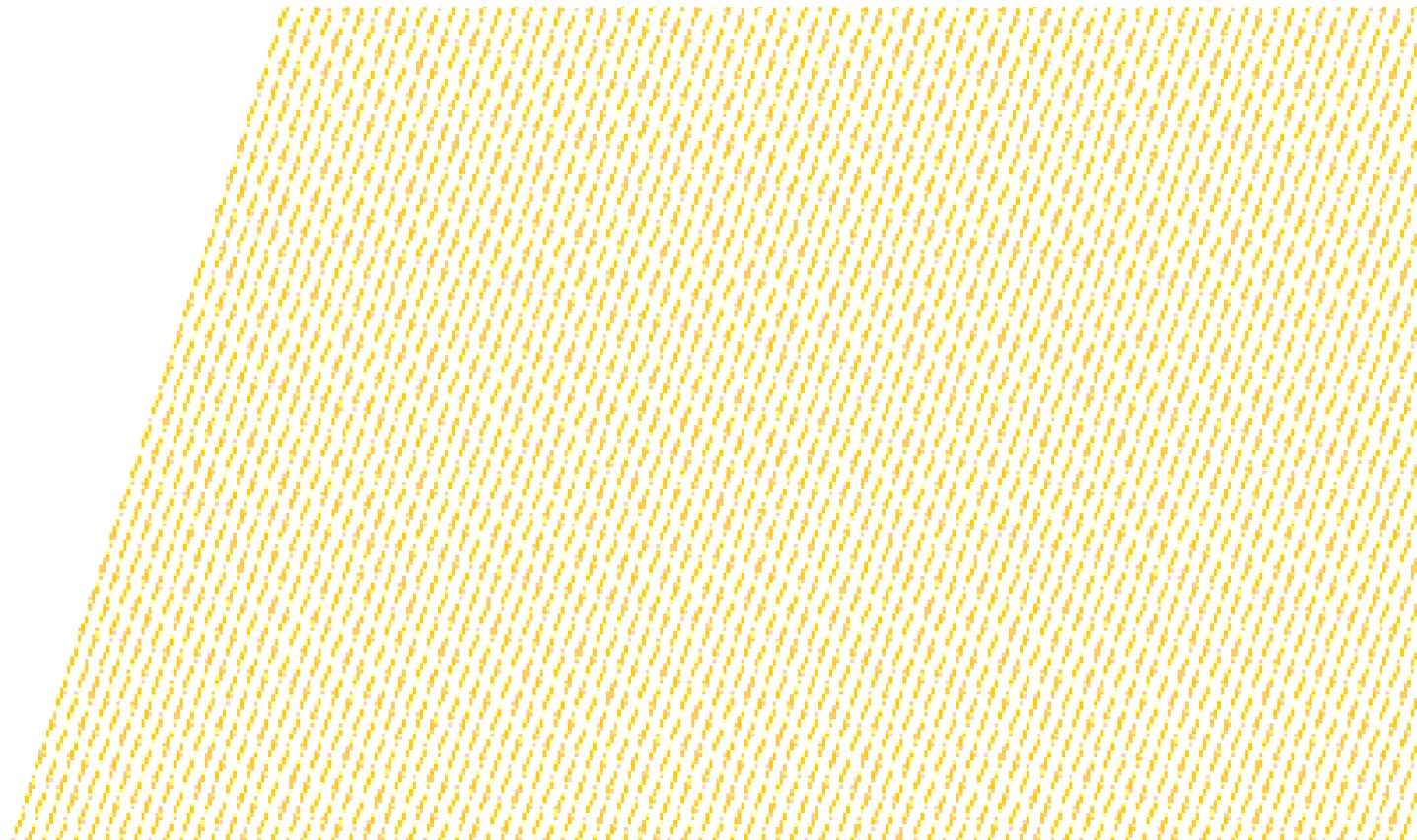
Giannini also stressed the need to support teachers, pointing to a recent survey by UNESCO and Education International which found that 40% out of 60,000 teachers did not feel able to teach about racism in the classroom.

In Spain, meanwhile, Dr Alejandro Tiana Ferrer, State Secretary of Education, said that the government had passed a new education law last year and are in the process of writing a new curriculum.

Ferrer added that the government had developed new materials on the history of the Roma people and would this week present new materials on terrorism in Spain.

Another question is whether teaching history can be a means of moving forward from the past or if it too raw and painful?

“History teaching needs to teach us how to prevent war and how to get over war because some of us come from a country that just a few decades ago was at war,” said Anamarija Viecek, State Secretary at Serbia’s Ministry of Education.

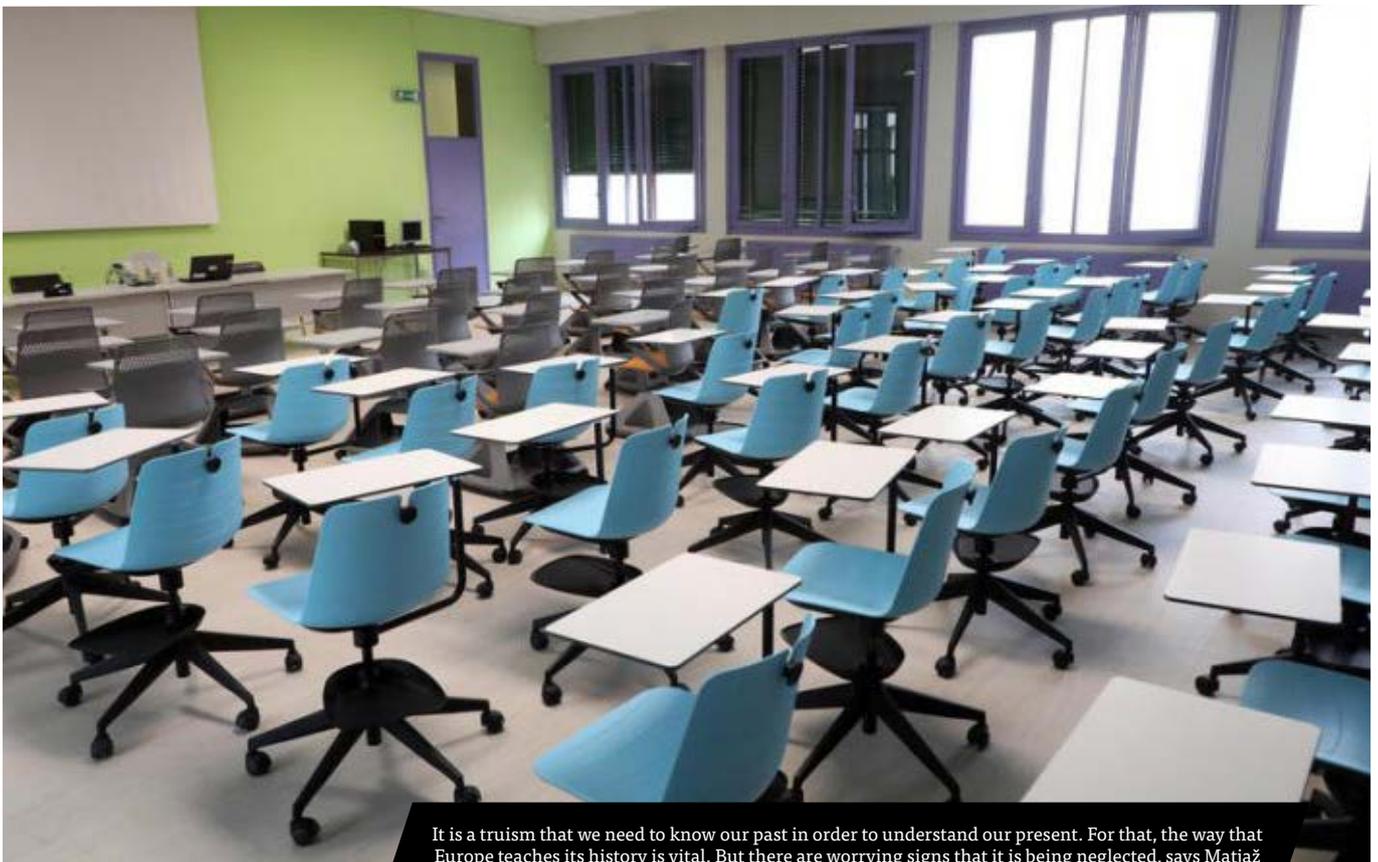


INTERVIEW

'We need to know what happened in Europe in order to understand the Europe of today'

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By Benjamin Fox | EURACTIV.com



It is a truism that we need to know our past in order to understand our present. For that, the way that Europe teaches its history is vital. But there are worrying signs that it is being neglected, says Matjaž Gruden, Director of Democratic Participation of the Council of Europe. [EPA-EFE/MATTEO BAZZI]

Despite the importance of history teaching to understand our past and present, Matjaž Gruden, Director of Democratic Participation of the Council of Europe, worries that it is falling down the list of priorities in education across Europe.

“One particular challenge is that

we are minimising the importance of history teaching as part of overall education, and especially democratic culture in our schools in many countries,” he told EURACTIV.

“We see a tendency where the hours devoted to history teaching are reduced, we have countries where

history education in secondary school is becoming optional.”

The Observatory held its first annual conference earlier this month, a year after being launched with the backing of 17 member states. At the start of the event, Hungary announced that it would join as an observer to the

observatory for one year, with a view to full membership.

“The conference was important because it marked the end of the preparatory setting up phase of something that is very new and requires a lot of political and diplomatic work,” said Gruden.

“It was a very good opportunity to present the Observatory to the world, but to use a platitude, the real work starts now,” he added.

Its role is primarily to coordinate. The mandate and purpose of the Observatory is to observe and collect data and prepare and offer that data and its analysis to member states. It is also designed to work with the Council of Europe's history teaching and education programme.

The European Commission, meanwhile, has also given its endorsement to the Observatory, alongside €1 million in financial support for its work, and Gruden said the OHTE was “pleasantly surprised by the manner in which that support was announced, and the volume of the support.”

One of the issues raised by delegates was that teaching history inevitably has a national bias and that, because of the wars, ethnic conflict and colonialism that have scarred Europe, teaching them can still be deeply painful.

“We know that Europe produced enormous quantities of history, and very often that history was riddled with conflict and war, and many other characteristics that may still be difficult and maybe painful to fully face, even after many years. That makes history teaching complex and sensitive,” said Gruden.

He added that “history has again become a target of attempts to instrumentalise it, to distort and

manipulate it for political reasons.”

HISTORY VS NATIONALISM

But it is crucial to distinguish between teaching a nation's past and promoting nationalism.

“There is a difference between a national history and a nationalist history. History is always composed of facts and interpretation, and that interpretation is also influenced and coloured by specific contexts, be they national, local or regional,” says Gruden.

“In principle, there's nothing wrong with that. It's in no way the ambition or the mandate of the Observatory to lead to some sort of harmonised history curriculum,” he added.

He pointed to the different teaching experiences of one of Europe's more controversial battles as a case in point.

“My colleague used the example of the Battle of Waterloo. It is regarded, understood, seen and felt in different ways on both sides of the Channel,” Gruden explains.

“National history is very important, and we must be respectful of it. But on the other hand, there is a difference between national history and perspective on events which are historical facts, interpretations, and then distortions and manipulations of them,” he adds.

DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES

One vital element, Gruden said, is the “notion of multi perspective in history”.

This “very simply means that you and I can have a different perspective of the same historical event. There's

nothing wrong with that. What is important is that we have that capacity of understanding of the fact that another person can have a different view and that the same event can have different connotations for the other person,” he says.

A recent survey by UNESCO found that 60% of history teachers were uncomfortable teaching classes on racism and colonialism. So how can they be given the confidence and support to tackle these subjects, which were, until recently, taboo topics?

Gruden argued that the competencies of democratic culture “include values, skills, attitudes, knowledge and critical thinking.”

“All these are very relevant in the context of history education, particularly critical thinking and understanding of information,” he said.

“If you put them all together, and you create the situation where the teacher has the means, the support and the backing to teach any subject and history in particular, then you will have students who will have the necessary capacity to not only accept knowledge but also give them the necessary resilience against any attempts to manipulate or influence them.”

He adds that a grounding in history is vital to Europe's democratic culture and citizenship.

“If you want to teach young people about the importance of democracy, human rights, the rule of law and respect for human dignity, it is very important to have that historical context.”

“If not, you run the risk, and I think we have been for some time, that we are trying to transmit these values and knowledge in a very abstract

way that may appear dogmatic, in a way that young people today do not fully understand why it is relevant to them, without having the knowledge about what can happen and has happened when these values have been violated," he explains.

"We need that historical context. We need to know what happened in Europe in order to understand the Europe of today," Gruden concluded.

PANDEMICS PAST

The same is true for the COVID pandemic, which has seen a growing acceptance of conspiracy theories by a significant minority of people.

"A better knowledge about a European history of pandemics could be quite a lot of help in understanding how to better deal with pandemics today," said Gruden.

"We have a tendency to look at things happening to us as being one of a kind and unprecedented, but this is not the case."

Gruden points out that there is plenty of evidence that people reacted in much the same way in historical pandemics.

"If you look at Daniel Defoe's diaries from the London Plague in 1665, you can see that people were taking their information from 'old wives' tales' and hypnotists," says Gruden, an acknowledgement that conspiracy and quackery have always been with us.

"In Renaissance Italy, there was a 'pass sanitaire', and at the time, people were reacting in the same way to the same requirement to having to have a certificate to say that they didn't have the disease," he adds.

"One thing that is very important is having trust and confidence in science. History will always confirm that this is how humanity has managed to mitigate and overcome such situations."

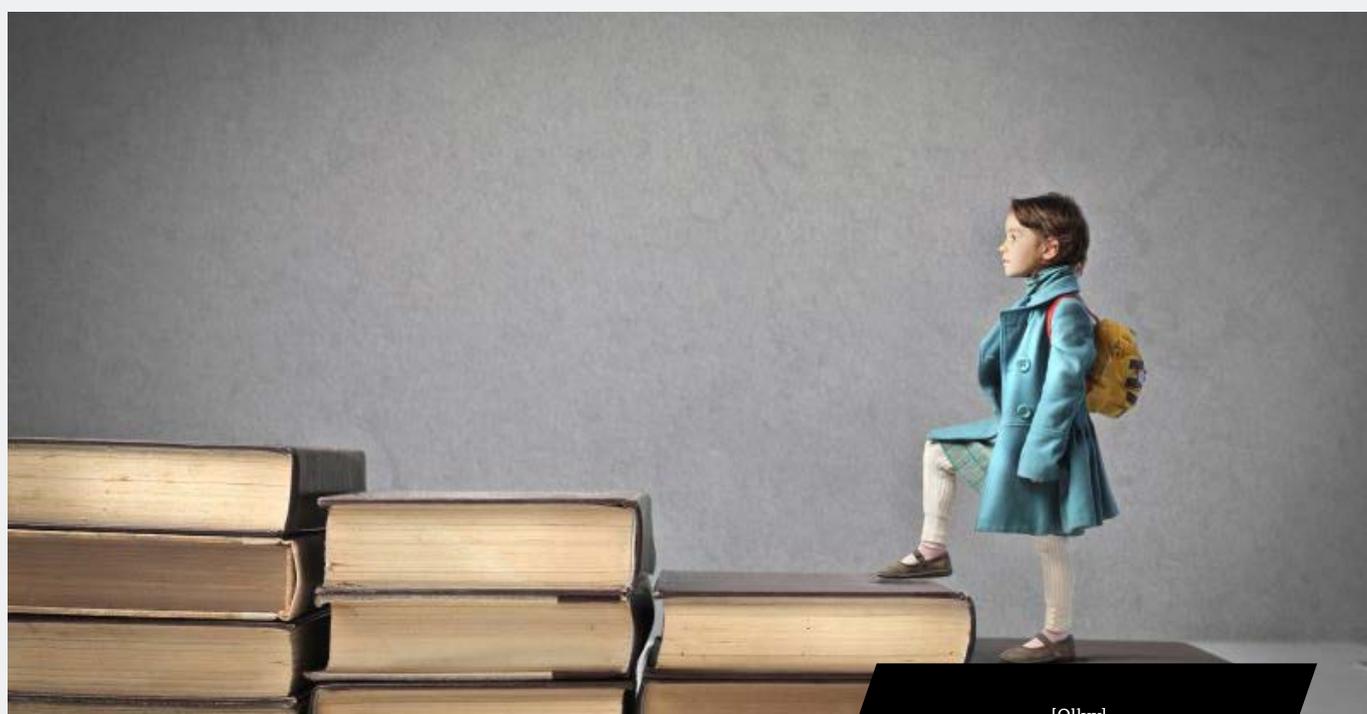
PROMOTED CONTENT

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History education can put democracies back on track

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By Aurora Ailincăi | Observatory on History Teaching in Europe



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The backsliding of democracy in Europe is also driven by the distortion of historical facts and facilitated by a lack of the will and ability to identify disinformation. History education is a key element in providing future generations with the knowledge, understanding and tools necessary to address the challenges of the 21st century.

Aurora Ailincăi is the Executive

Director of Observatory on History Teaching in Europe, Council of Europe

The global state of teachers' abilities to address sensitive but crucial issues in the field of education on human rights, tolerance and cultural diversity is alarming. Around half of the 58,000 respondents in the 2021 UNESCO's Global Survey for Teachers indicated that they face challenges in teaching these topics. The challenges are

often related to a lack of cultural and historical knowledge and appropriate methodologies ([UNESCO 2021: 35](#)).

Today, Europe faces a multitude of political and societal challenges, which in many cases affect the quality of democracy. These challenges range from adapting democratic governance to handle the increasingly diverse nature of our societies to deliberate attempts to weaken or dismantle

democratic institutions and culture, partly from within the centres of power ([Bermeo 2016](#)). These attempts are often connected to the seemingly mounting tide of nationalism, including its deliberate misuse to generate legitimacy and support for populist politics in the face of democratic shortcomings ([Bieber 2018](#)).

These developments have contributed to the revitalisation of certain dividing lines in Europe, which can have especially severe consequences on reconciliation processes in conflict and post-conflict situations. During the COVID-19 pandemic, we have experienced a surge in hatred, racism and anti-Semitism, as foreigners and minority populations have been scapegoated for the outbreak and spread of the disease worldwide ([UNESCO 2021](#)). Such practices reduce the ability to live peacefully together in culturally diverse, democratic societies.

The Council of Europe, as the continent's leading human rights organisation, cannot stay silent when its core values and principles – the respect for human rights, democracy, and the rule of law – are attacked. These are not only the prerequisites for good governance. They facilitate international cooperation across the continent and are the key components of the European order of peace.

While teaching history cannot be the panacea for all these ills, the current threats to democracy, international cooperation, and ultimately peace are closely linked to the negation or distortion of historical facts and events by developing a one-sided and nationalist historical narrative ([Bentrovato & Schulze 2016: 18](#)).

The Council of Europe has early recognised the decisive role that history education plays in maintaining peace and democracy and in building understanding across borders. As much as history education can contribute to reinforce divisions within and between European societies, it also has the potential to strengthen democratic culture and understanding, as it can offer multiple perspectives on regional, national, and European history.

The relative success of manipulative accounts of history is facilitated by the lack of historical knowledge and understanding, the limited ability of many citizens to reflect on the production of historical knowledge, and the absence of the will and capacity to identify and distinguish such accounts from authentic historical scholarship.

[The UNESCO \(2020\)](#) for instance, stressed the importance of media and information literacy in regard to the fight against hate speech. History education therefore has a decisive role to play in helping students develop critical thinking skills, as outlined in the Council of Europe Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture. History education can, for instance, provide students with the skill to detect disinformation by uncovering mechanisms of propaganda through historical material and by discussing similarities and differences to contemporary forms of manipulation.

The Council of Europe has a long track record in promoting quality history teaching that contributes to the strengthening of human rights, democracy, and the rule of law, as well as mutual understanding and cooperation across borders through projects, publications, and policy

recommendations. However, these traditional forms of activity do not suffice in the light of the current challenges.

The [Observatory on History Teaching in Europe](#), established in 2020 as an Enlarged Partial Agreement with currently [17 full members and one observer State](#), takes the Council of Europe's work on history teaching a step further. The Observatory aims to take stock of the state of history teaching in its member States through a series of regular and thematic reports. While the Observatory is not a monitoring body, the collection and analysis of data on history education in its member States is part of a follow-up to the Council of Europe's recommendations and good practices of history teaching.

The Observatory seeks to identify good practice initiatives not only in the organisation of curricula and history textbooks, but also in areas like learning outcomes and the experiences of history students. In this way, young people have the opportunity to develop their thought processes beyond their immediate experience or national ideologies.

A multi-perspective and fact-based approach, which is central to the work of the Council of Europe in this field, provides the students with the tools to think critically about the past and historical narratives. This approach is preferable to expecting them to absorb content without considering and reflecting on the impact a given event has had on our societies from multiple angles.

The snapshot that the Observatory takes of the state of history teaching enables governments to identify weak points in their own history education. This provides an important

opportunity to improve democratic culture by equipping citizens with the knowledge, understanding and tools to identify and reject manipulative narratives and to independently participate in the democratic process. It thus institutionalises the dialogue about history teaching and therefore facilitates the reflection on and the exchange of good practices between member States, involving governments, research institutes, experts and civil society actors.

This inclusive approach ensures a balanced, comprehensive and – as far as possible – unbiased view of the state of history teaching in the member States. This must be the basis for improving history education so that it can better contribute to the development of democratic culture.

As democratic decline is a European and even global phenomenon, 17 member States can only be a starting point for the Observatory's work. For the Observatory to be able to truly make a difference, more member States are needed. The Observatory is an Enlarged Partial Agreement, which means that not only European, but every country worldwide can join. Thus, every country has the possibility to assess and improve its history education in cooperation with the Observatory.

With the help of the Observatory, every country can do its bit to strengthen human rights, democracy, and the rule of law, and ultimately, peace. This is not a European prerogative, and the Observatory does not need to be limited to Europe.



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