What’s new in teaching Europe’s past?
History is more than just a set of dates or kings and queens to memorise. And while history teaching is unique in shaping national identity and memory, there is invariably more than one interpretation of facts and historical events.

How can history education practitioners learn from each other about the teaching of history?

This event report covers the first edition of the “European Innovation Days in History Education”, which brought together teachers, researchers, museologists, and students to exchange on the latest practices and research in history education.
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Innovative teaching and cross-border projects are key to going beyond a purely national version of history and will be vital to post-conflict teaching and reconciliation following the war in Ukraine, say European education experts.

The teaching of the war and the context from which it started will be vital to post-conflict reconciliation, said delegates at the European Innovation Days in History Education, part of the Council of Europe and EU Joint Project HISTOLAB.

Sociology teacher Zorana Matićević pointed to a series of partnerships between teachers in Serbia, North Macedonia and Cyprus, of which she is a project team leader, in teaching about the Second World War.

These involve twinning projects between schools, weeks of remembrance and developing joint lesson plans.

The main purpose of such initiatives is “not to reconcile with our enemies but with our own dark sides and histories”, said Christina Koulouri of Panteion University of Social and Political Sciences, Athens.

“We need regional projects where bilateral conflict can be contextualised,” she added.

Hosted by the Council of Europe, the Observatory on History Teaching in Europe seeks to improve the quality of history teaching by tackling “historical manipulations” and the use of history as propaganda and to
“enhance the understanding of democratic culture” through quality education.

Established in 2020, the Observatory now has the support of 16 member states across Europe.

‘At a time when historical falsifications and manipulations are rampant on social networks, history can be used as a tool for propaganda to justify the unjustifiable,” said the Observatory.

“In this context, historical education through all its vectors has an essential role to play in promoting the contribution of critical thinking as a democratic foundation to respond to contemporary challenges,” it added.

The nature of history education in Europe has become a hotly contested topic in recent years, in large part because of its unique role as a source of national identity, values and ideology.

Well before Russia’s invasion of Ukraine last February, educators have been wrestling with how to best approach Europe’s legacy of world wars, ethnic-based conflicts, civil wars, and recent transitions to democracy and colonialism.

Teachers across Europe face some similar challenges. Since there is no common policy on curricula or teaching, ethnocentric bias in the teaching of history is present across the continent, while any changes to the history textbooks in most countries depend on national ministries of education which exercise tight control over the content of school curricula and books.

Moreover, delegates said that putting together such projects with historians in conflict-affected regions such as South East Europe and the Balkans remains difficult.

“It is a mistake to try to get rid of national history, the question is how to live with it,” said Susanne Popp of the International Society for History Didactics.

Increasingly, the focus of educators is on teaching that there is more than one interpretation of historical events.

“We need history as a means to know what our common heritage is but that has to be balanced with multiperspectivity,” Portuguese education minister, João Costa, told EURACTIV.

“We should not be using history to create a single version of facts.”
With historical falsifications and manipulations rampant on social networks, history can be used as a tool for propaganda. Teaching in Europe must encourage critical thinking and multiple perspectives, Portuguese education minister João Costa told EURACTIV.

"History is about memory and identity, complexity and being able to interpret, to look at multiple variables to understand the past and present," Costa said.

Speaking ahead of the European Innovation Days in History Education, Costa explained that history teaching is unique in shaping national identity, memory and political values. However, that makes it vulnerable to politicisation and distortion.

"Populism is about providing simple answers to complex questions. Complex questions require complex answers," Costa added.

In this context, formal humanities education, as well as citizenship and visits to museums and sites of commemoration have an essential role in developing critical thinking among young people.

"We have to be able to learn from the past," Costa told EURACTIV.

"When we are talking about very timely topics like media literacy, financial literacy, human rights, gender equality we can see that in many periods of history, those issues were already there," he said.
In the modern debates on inclusion and equality, “we can see that the arguments against inclusion are exactly the same as those that were used to exclude black or Jewish people,” he added.

The COVID-19 pandemic and Russia’s invasion of Ukraine have also contributed to a steady recent rise in fake news and the return of old stereotypes and tropes, particularly on social media.

Costa contends that fake news and propaganda have always been present in society but warns that “we see anti-Semitism growing again in Europe.”

“There are some states where anti-Semitism is not taught and we have to be able to relate what happened back then with what is happening now.”

Costa said he also believes that history teaching and humanities are crucial in the new digital age. “Technology without content is poor,” he noted.

“History must be about facts but also about interpretation, being able to evaluate sources and the validity of information, critical thinking, and the ability to judge and to establish relations,” he said.

“Sometimes in recent times we have been afraid of the word ’ideology’ but providing education to everyone is an ideological project,” said Costa.

Multiperspectivity

“We need history as a means to create a single version of facts.”

That means moving away from the days of one-sided teaching of national history, particularly around the ethnic and religious conflicts that are part of Europe’s past, and the legacy of colonialism.

“Now we are paying much more attention to multiple sides, also because we need to develop areas of the curriculum where human rights and citizenship are becoming more important,” said Costa.

At the same time, new teaching methods are important to “to break down the walls between different subjects”.

“Innovation is not a goal, it is a tool in order to promote better learning,” he says, pointing to a series of projects introduced in Portugal.

“Schools are developing several projects in which what is taught in history is connected to what is taught in geography, science, citizenship education and that’s where, I think, we have the most innovative projects.”

Costa’s government in Lisbon has developed a national plan for arts that brings artists into school, using performance arts to motivate the attention of students and encourage interest in history.

However, education policy in Europe is a national competence and there is plenty of disagreement both across Europe and within individual countries over how history should be taught.

“At the same time, he is confident that standards are improving.

“History teachers complain because they think that there should be more space for history but that’s something that teachers from all areas of the curriculum. There is room for improvement but one good thing going forward is that we have highly qualified teachers and so standards are improving,” said Costa.

“It’s no longer what it was in my childhood: just a list of kings and dates to memorise.”
In his book “L’histoire, pour quoi faire?”, Serge Gruzinski (2015) highlighted that “the future is a mirror in which the past is reflected”. The French historian defended a history useful for society: a historical science that would allow a dialogue between the past and the present. What is history for? “Let’s start with the present, which assaults us from all sides”, Gruzinski replied.

Cosme J. Gómez Carrasco is Senior Lecturer in Social Sciences Education in the University of Murcia, Spain and Juan Ramón Moreno-Vera is Professor in the University of Murcia, Spain. In his posthumous essay “Apologie pour l’histoire ou métier d’historien” (1949), Founder of the “Annales, Histoire, Économie et société” journal, he indicated that historians must be social scientists. While knowledge of the past is necessary to understand the present, it is futile to try to understand the past without starting from the problems of today.

The present shows us problems that need to be addressed using the intellectual tools provided by historical science. In that sense, the internet and social networks
have made information sources widely available to society. At the same time, they have also opened the door for disinformation and fake news. Such has been the impact of this phenomenon that journalists, scientists, and sociologists have often used the term "post-truth". The debate around this phenomenon started to take center stage during the US presidential elections, and during the "Brexit" referendum. The Washington Post reported that, in his four-year mandate, Donald Trump posted or shared 12 tweets with false or misleading claims a day. The dissemination of fake news during the COVID-19 pandemic, or the attack on the US Capitol in January 2021, has shown the dangers of what the World Health Organization has named "infodemic".

As the Stanford History Education Group (USA) has pointed out, reliable information is key for healthy democratic societies where citizens participate in public life. If young people consume information without the skills to assess its credibility, without the ability to find out who is behind it, young people could be an easy target for pressure groups that blame marginalised groups, such as national, religious or cultural minorities for the outbreak of the disease. It is necessary to sensitise the public about such manipulations in order to reduce their efficacy. This can be done by explaining the processes of "othering" that occur in the wake of crises, pandemics and natural disasters, and the extremely destructive consequences they can have for minority groups. All of this must be approached through the prism of multiperspectivity, which takes into account the diverse points of view of different social groups, especially those that are the main targets of hate speech. History teaching can make a valuable contribution to develop such understanding. In this light, the first thematic report of the Council of Europe's Observatory on History Teaching in Europe precisely looks at how histories of pandemics and natural disasters are taught in the OHTE Member States, taking into account also the issue of minority scapegoating.

To sum up: through its unique potential to strengthen learners' critical thinking skills, history teaching can play an important role in addressing the current political, and social challenges facing our societies and especially, the attacks on democracy and democratic rights.

In co-operation with the DICSO research group (University of Murcia), the Council of Europe and the European Union are developing a toolkit on teaching multiperspectivity and recognising manipulation of history. This toolkit will consist of 20 learning-activities that aim to develop competences in the treatment of historical information, and in the recognition of fake news and hate speech from history. The research group in charge of designing, implementing, and evaluating this toolkit is composed of secondary school teachers, and researchers on history and history education. Researchers from Europe (Portugal, the Netherlands, Spain, England, Ireland and Sweden) are participating in this design, and researchers from Canada and the US are participating as expert reviewers.

To evaluate the effectiveness of these learning-activities, and the complete toolkit, a teacher training course will be designed so that teachers can implement the activities in their own classrooms. Data from more than a hundred secondary school classrooms is to be collected, with more than a thousand students expected to participate in the process in order to evaluate how their skills improve in the respective fields of competence.
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