

Teaching Difficult Histories: Key Principles For Democracy

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*This report is dedicated to the late Professor Christopher Coker (1953-2023),
who directed LSE IDEAS CSEEP, co-founding the Ratiu Forum and its
Teaching History Programme*

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Introduction

Since the 1989 fall of communist regimes in Europe, governments in the central-eastern and Balkan region have gradually transitioned—or have claimed to be doing so—into democratic systems and free countries. That path, however, has neither been easy nor uncontested. While some post-communist states have joined the European Union and NATO, others are stuck in a candidate-status limbo. The rise of populism and nationalism in the 2010s, within a global climate of financial instability, COVID-19 pandemic, and an international order increasingly predicated on great power conflict has even led to the scenario in which a NATO ally and EU member state has been declared only ‘partly free’, while another has faced sanctions over its anti-democratic domestic judicial reforms.

Into the third decade of the 21st Century, the teachers, students, and wider civil societies of post-communist Europe are still grappling with the legacy of communist-era History education—one-party controlled and ideologically curated—and with current state and media distortions of history, both national and regional. Post-communist governments in Europe have instrumentalised this legacy, particularly around national mythmaking, as tools to drum up public support for populist and autocratic political agendas; most urgently, Russia’s war on Ukraine has been justified by President Vladimir Putin in historical terms, however distorted, and increasingly has the potential to destabilise the region. Failing to confront difficult, controversial pasts and focusing on national stories of victimhood—at the exclusion of ethnic minorities and neighbours who share similar histories—hinders the creative functioning of democracy and prevents the region from cooperating most effectively on vital issues of geopolitical and economic security.

In 2019, The Ratiu Forum was established between LSE IDEAS, the Ratiu Family Charitable Foundation, and the Ratiu Democracy Centre. Sitting under the Central and South-East Europe Programme (CSEEP) at LSE IDEAS, the Ratiu Forum launched its first Teaching History workshop in February 2020, becoming an annual event held in Turda (Cluj County, Romania). The workshops—led by John Lotherington (21st Century Trust and Salzburg Global Seminar)—aim to engage with Romanian high school History teachers in strengthening their teaching skills and encouraging them to explore with their students the dark and hidden past of Romanian, Central-European and Balkan history—facilitating and improving cross-border understanding. This project report details the discussions and findings of the February 2023 and May 2024 workshops, in addition to the April 2024 Third Annual Belgrade Symposium on History Teaching—held by Education for the 21st Century—for which the Ratiu Forum was an official partner.

The Ratiu Forum has established and expanded upon a strong regional network of practitioners and academics over the years: institutions and NGOS such as the 21st Century Trust (UK) and Salzburg Global Seminar (Austria), the Observatory on History Teaching in Europe and EuroClio [European Association of History Educators] (Council of Europe), Education for the 21st Century (Serbia), the Sofia Platform (Bulgaria), and Civics Innovation Hub (Germany/ Bulgaria/ Croatia), the Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation (the Netherlands), the Auschwitz Institute for the Prevention of Genocide and Mass Atrocities (Bucharest Office, Romania), the Intercultural Institute Timișoara (Romania); and academics from the London School of Economics, the University of Belgrade (Serbia), the University of Debrecen (Hungary) and the University of Bucharest (Romania), to name a few. It is this network that the Ratiu Forum has connected to teachers from Romania, Moldova, and their neighbours in the wider region to address the challenges of teaching History, and the subject's politicisation as a factor in Europe's democratic backsliding.

History for the 21st Century

The biggest impact on civic education, though indirectly, comes from the discourse surrounding the threats and challenges to democracy both at home and globally. At the heart of all these debates is the question of what makes a good citizen. In countries where there is much disagreement on issues of identity, history and belonging, and where there is no consensus on the basic principles and values of democracy, civic education becomes a battlefield for political leaders seeking to use it for their own purposes, instead of creating the best conditions for democratic engagement.

—Civics Innovation Hub (2023 report).¹

It was only in 2021 that Romania's lawmakers—including the President of the Federation of Jewish communities in Romania—approved the introduction of the Holocaust and Jewish history into its school curriculum, coming into effect for the 2023 academic year.² Romania's nationalist and populist political party, the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR), criticised the decision, calling the Holocaust a 'minor issue' and part of an 'ideological experiment' on children to displace their 'national history'.³ The impact that the AUR's press release could have matters: the party came fourth nationwide in the 2020 parliamentary elections, and current polls for the 2024 elections put it at nearly 20% support.⁴

Teachers might ask what 'Jewish history' precisely entails. Indeed, as has been pointed out by several panellists throughout the workshops, there is a tendency in European discourse, which has survived the 20th Century, to separate Jews from their national identity, i.e., not French, Hungarian, Italian, Polish, Romanian or Russian people of Jewish descent and/or religious practice. This is not to say that Jewish history should be excluded from the History curriculum; it should be included precisely because European Jews have been historically treated separately to the Christian majority. As Louisa Slavkova had us consider, when we think of the achievements of medieval Gothic architecture we don't think of synagogues, because those built in that architectural style were not preserved, and instead erased from history; this is precisely what the

Nazis and their collaborators attempted to do to European Jews as human beings. For practical teaching purposes, however, the term is vague and represents an example of the challenges that History teaching faces overall within post-communist Europe.

The workshops' participants share a common purpose in teaching History or applying it in informal/non-formal education: History has a societal and civic value. Story-telling is key for our sense of identity, and History can hold up a mirror to society as a yardstick for progress. However, there is no consensus on the nature of History and its purpose as a form of educational enquiry or academic study. Some believe that it contains a truth that historians can and must reach; others that its didactic value is greater than any absolute truth. There are divergent views on what qualifies as 'bad' or 'good' history, as well as whether History should be considered an art or a science, or both. How we view the role of History in our society shapes how we teach it; it is a constant rethinking and re-evaluation of the facts of the past.

That role has changed throughout the centuries. The Enlightenment refashioned History as a tool for nation-building; no longer the preserve of elites but entering the classroom to build good citizens. Slobodan Markovich asked us to consider whether we can possibly reach objectivity in History—the 19th Century approach as personified by Leopold von Ranke and Lord Acton—or whether we should even try; as E. H. Carr put it, 'the pulpy part of the fruit is more rewarding than the hard core'.⁵ Whatever the answers to these complex philosophical questions, fundamentally the topics of the past must mean something in our present reality. Historical facts may not change—and even then, they may do with new sources—

but our values and norms evolve over the generations. This is why it is crucial to inculcate critical thinking in our teachers, policymakers, and societies, interrogating historical myths and what might be left aside—even if we find those myths and occlusions alluring and emotionally satisfying. If History is about persuasive arguments based upon the evidence, then we must address contradictory sources and, sometimes, force ourselves to face the opposing argument to our own head-on.

The communist regimes of the Eastern Bloc have left a damaging legacy to their societies' critical thinking about their past, impacting education curricula and perpetuating generational and ethnic divides by being ideologically rooted in authoritarianism. What counted as History within Communist Romania is a relevant example: the 1948 Law for Educational Reform banned 'didactic textbooks', religious teaching and foreign schools, authorising only the Stalinist interpretation of Marxist-Leninist precepts. Contrary to any rational system of education, Romania's History curriculum would be designed by its propaganda wing, Agitprop, and curated by one authority for the next decade: Mihail Roller, who would author Romania's official History textbook, purge professors from school and university faculties, invent historical events, and censor real ones. Roller would also ensure that he alone could provide access for previously imprisoned teachers to return to formal teaching.

This is the context within which much of today's older and middle generation of Romanian teachers were educated in, trained and worked. The generation born after 1989, or those too young to remember, are still grappling with this deep legacy—as is evident in our workshops. While there has always

been tension, perhaps universally, between teacher and student, the meaning of authority within one-party ideological dictatorships has a particular intensity. Adults in positions of authority were not to be questioned by their social 'inferiors'. While some in our audiences felt that teachers should not be afraid of students and assert their authority, others—including a high school student—shot back that students and youth are tired of being treated as 'stupid' and being punished for questioning assumptions and the status quo.

That same student also related that voters in Transylvania today still largely support a local mayoral candidate based on ethnicity, not policy. If History is designed to help us understand who we are and where we come from, then it should also explain why people of a certain ethnicity speak a certain language in a particular part of the world. Here we can detect the legacy of Roller's curriculum, which conformed to Soviet nationalities policy and removed the role of ethnic Hungarians and Germans from the story of Romania's past. In Transylvania, a Hungarian Autonomous Region was set up to subordinate the Hungarian minority to the Romanian 'big brother'. Babeş-Bolyai University, a regular collaborator with the Ratiu Forum, is the result of a 1959 merger between the Hungarian Bolyai University and the Romanian Babeş University; not a peaceful one either, as the Hungarian rector subsequently committed suicide.⁶ This policy enforced an 'equality of suffering' between all identities, regardless of the disparity between the Romanian ethnic majority and the rest. One result of this was that, when the Hungarian Academy published a three-volume history of Transylvania in 1986, the ethnic Romanian community responded in outrage, worsening diplomatic relations between Communist Hungary and Communist Romania.⁷

As a subject, History intrinsically connects to other fields and disciplines. Echoing a commonly used epithet, journalism is the first draft of history; when an autocrat or populist party captures the media landscape, they control the historical narrative. In the end, as Dominic Howell put it succinctly, good History is a continuation of democracy; being good historians and teachers helps us become better democrats, while autocracies become increasingly divorced from reality. How, then, can we become better teachers and citizens, considering the challenges History teachers face in the modern, digitalised world full of weaponised information and echo chambers?

Those practical and intellectual challenges are many. Our applications and audience comments revealed that one of the biggest challenges for the History teacher is how to keep students engaged while tackling the complexity of historical events; below are examples from our workshops and initiatives from our network addressing this challenge, such as the 'Histories from Belene' project. Our partners in Belgrade and workshops in Romania have consistently found that there is a large gap between what History teachers feel is relevant for the curriculum, and what topics they spend their time teaching—and how they teach them. There are only one or two hours in a week to allocate to History in secondary/high school lesson plans. Many students, through online content and social media, also express their view of what they feel is relevant, or right or wrong in the syllabus; they question established facts, truths and narratives. Many teachers feel their authority threatened by this digital and politicised world; this report will explore our findings on these themes, both the advantage of being digital natives and recommendations for educators.

Weaponising History

*'The truth is rarely pure,
and never simple.'* – Oscar Wilde,
The Importance of Being Earnest
(Act One, 1895).

There is no more urgent and tragic example of weaponised history in current European geopolitics than that used to justify Russia's war on Ukraine. Several sessions of our workshops analysed Putin's July 2021 essay: 'On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians'. Both Carol Capita and Raul Câstorcea pointed to Putin's introduction of several historical anachronisms, threading them into the rest of the argument as if a matter of fact: he argues that Russians, Ukrainians and Belarusians are one people with no separate history or culture, proposing that the Ukrainian state was invented by Lenin and the Bolsheviks. Even more perversely, Putin's full-scale invasion of Ukraine claims to be liberating the 'Little Russians' from neo-Nazism. These myths are now in Russian school textbooks and required reading in the Russian military. Rather than portraying any accurate version of history, the essay instead reveals the Kremlin's imperial ambitions on its neighbour.

What makes Putin's methods and essay particularly dangerous, however, is that it contains a tiny grain of truth, surrounded by a field of falsehoods. Raul Câstorcea examined the problematic legacy of ultra-nationalist (and arguably fascist) Stepan Bandera, and Ukraine's 2015 'memory laws': the legislation made unlawful any public 'manifestations of disrespect' for Ukrainian independence fighters of the Second World War, including Bandera and his Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN).⁸ This despite the fact that the OUN, among other Ukrainian nationalist

groups, carried out the mass murder of Jews and ethnic cleansing of Poles within the *Reichskommissariat Ukraine*. Contemporary Ukraine, like any other aspiring democracy, must confront its dark past; without an open exploration and discussion about their controversial events and historical figures, especially the nature of Ultrnationalism and the hero-worship of Bandera, Putin and Russian society are provided with unwilling ammunition in the information wars. On the other side of the military-civilian war, with Western moral and financial support at risk of fatigue, it is essential for Ukraine to prove to its partners its commitment to being an open society.

These issues are not exclusive to those countries outside of Western institutions or to East Slavic nations. Information war and identity politics have been weaponised all over the central-eastern and southeastern region over the last few decades; 'salami tactics' have been applied to History education by the populist governments of post-communist European states, including members of the European Union and NATO and therefore those categorised to be democracies and free societies. In 2018, Poland passed the *Amendment to the Act on the Institute of National Remembrance*: the 1998 Act was passed to address the problem of Holocaust denial. However, this amendment criminalises the act of publicly stating that Poles collaborated with Nazis in their war crimes or were complicit in the Holocaust, as well as denying that Poles were victims of Nazi and Communist 'crimes', prompting backlash from Israel, the United States, and European leaders. Punishment ranges from being fined to receiving three years in jail; historians and broadcasters have already been investigated and charged with violating the amendment, despite

an abundance of source material and the backing of international academia—the courts took on the role of historian away from scholars.⁹

As memory wars in Poland threaten historical scholarship and reconciliation for past injustices, Eric Weaver opened our eyes to the phenomenon of increasingly nationalist and politicised content of History textbooks within Hungary. In 2011, the Hungarian Ministry of Education under Prime Minister Victor Orbán issued new school textbooks, simultaneously carrying out its centralisation of the education system and stealing the initiative away from local municipalities. The Hungarian Government has since promised, as of 2020, to provide all public-school students with state sanctioned textbooks, free of charge. These textbooks reflect the conservative and ‘Christian values’ of Orbán and his party Fidesz, defining and promoting Hungary’s political and social norms as they see them. They contain clear negative messages about multiculturalism and migration, depicting the European Union as a German-controlled entity, as well as photographs of Orbán with Popes and other key global figures; pushing a mild form of the cult of personality.¹⁰ These photographs and cartoons are targeted towards the younger generations of students as well as those in higher education.

The challenges of this gradual autocratisation of education impacts textbook publishers and teachers deeply; the very people who provide and champion the education of a society’s developing youth. Publishers find it either difficult or impossible to compete with free government-supplied textbooks, and many find their licenses rejected by the government when coming under regular review. Teachers face immense top-down pressure from the state, where their choice is

between protesting and losing their jobs, or staying silent: in January 2023, the Hungarian Government issued a decree which makes it easier to dismiss teachers who engage in strike action or other civil disobedience—such as speaking to the press.¹¹

Classroom History teaching has often faced the challenge of going beyond the textbook; given the time constraints and content overload, to meet the reality of exam and curriculum demands and achieve high grades—especially to reach university—students must forego nuance, critical-thinking, and searching for ‘the truth’ by memorising the textbooks available to them. Marco Šuica informed us that Serbian textbooks do provide historical sources, but nevertheless do not engage in sources reflecting multiple viewpoints; the histories of Serbs and Bosnian Serbs have been combined, for example, into one ‘national history’. This has allowed for textbooks written for 14–15-year-olds to question the responsibility of the (Bosnian) Serb shelling of Sarajevo or even omitting the Srebrenica massacre of 1995 entirely.¹²

Disarming History

Given the challenges that teachers in sensitive environments face, it has become increasingly necessary to understand how to counter the weaponisation of History effectively. The Teaching History workshops have sought to provide educators with some of the tools and variety of engaging methods to do so. The 2024 workshop included a screening of the three-part 2023 documentary titled *Comrade: The Making, Glory, and Unmaking of a Dictator*, produced by John Florescu (Chainsaw Films); it raised challenging themes and propositions for our understanding of that history. The films



interviewed (and utilised archival footage) of people within the centre of power; in government and state positions or at least close to the Ceaușescus. The consensus of these interviewees appears to be that Nicolae Ceaușescu's fall from power in 1989 or soon after was inevitable, due to a variety of factors: he had terminal diabetes; there was a coup plot from the army from which the *Securitate* backed off; and Gorbachev, Bush, and the Warsaw Pact leaders wanted him gone for the sake of geopolitical stability.

The more individuals the author has spoken to about the Romanian Revolution of 1989, the murkier the picture gets. This kaleidoscope of events is made up of the experiences of first-hand witnesses; this is before approaching the abundance of conspiracy theories shared nation-wide in Romania throughout the years and generations since. There is a strong current of historical determinism to the fall of the Ceaușescus, based on existing theories. Of course, all these individuals by necessity

speak after the fact; after all, the entire Eastern Bloc leadership (minus the USSR) fell in 1989. This adds further questions: for example, what is a revolution versus a coup d'état? Did the Romanian people overthrow the dictatorship? Did communism in Romania end in that moment? On the one hand, we have theories that the army agitated the crowd to become violent; others that Soviet agents provocateurs were in and out of the Romanian capital inciting the people—our sources for the latter come from the *Securitate* itself. While the communist order no longer exists in Romania, in the 1990s there was a continuity of individuals from the party and the army who controlled the trial and execution, seizing the reins of power. This is not a dissimilar continuity to those who led Yugoslavia out of the Cold War and into the break-up wars of the 1990s.

Tumultuous historical events are complex and nuanced. For Romania's experience of the downfall of communism, we have a wealth of sources from many points of

view in that society. Healthy democracies thrive on open sources of information and critical approaches to those sources. In History teaching, a wide range of sources also democratises the experiences and views of the contemporary participants or eyewitnesses to events. Carol Capiță demonstrated this with the group-led workshop, in which groups were provided with secret identities and were tasked with writing and performing an eyewitness account of events in Bucharest on 21 December 1989—when Nicolae Ceășescu’s speech to the crowd was first interrupted, sparking violent street confrontations for several days. The identities included: an army infantryman, a *securitate* agent, a pensioner, a teacher, and a young student; some supportive of and some against the regime.

The key lesson for participants was to understand how much the story of events alters if one or more of the eyewitness accounts is removed—either for political reasons or passed unnoticed with a lack of imagination in research. We, the researchers, know the course of events from 22 to 25 December, culminating in the Ceășescu’s

execution by the army; those contemporary eyewitnesses did not. It is crucial that multiple-view sources are covered by History textbooks and within teaching and research overall, just as a diversity of opinion and participation are vital to a healthy democracy. Inclusivity within History is key for a democratic system to engage and more fully understand its own past, and that of other places and peoples.

Another exercise involved the contested histories of public monuments and spaces. Timothy Ryback and Marie-Louise Jansen took us through the dynamics of contested histories, which often contain a legal element. Auschwitz, for example: should it be a place of mourning or of learning, or is it a forensic site of genocide? Reconstructing its barracks for tourist visits, for example, intrinsically damages the remaining forensic evidence available.

Meanwhile national myths are expressed by new statues that have been erected in Hungary, Romania, Russia, Serbia and elsewhere. Budapest’s ‘Memorial to the Victims of the German Occupation’, unveiled

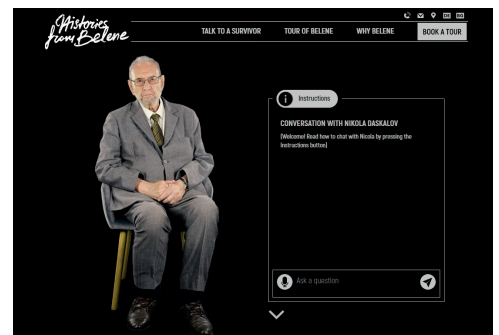


on Freedom Square in 2014, characterises the Third Reich as a bronze eagle, descending onto an orb-wielding Archangel Gabriel (Hungary). While Hungary was indeed invaded by Germany in March 1944, this was within the context of being an Axis ally at risk of surrender; in that role, Hungarian authorities carried out arrests, deportations, and mass killings of Jews, and the Royal Hungarian Army participated in Hitler's invasions of both Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union in 1941.

As Dr Capita argued, much of the visual culture of such monuments is unreflective; the audience should therefore question the story behind them and the assumptions they make. Viewers should consider how proliferating these narratives serve the purposes of the governments and patrons who build and finance them. Our workshop put the participants into groups, analysing a series of statues depicting the same historical figures in different artistic and architectural styles and locations. Each series of statues had their story to tell about the national myth promotion in recent years by populist governments in the region.¹³

Remembering Forgotten Histories

One panellist posed the question of whether we can truly understand an historical event if we did not observe it ourselves. The witnesses who hold living testimonies to much of the 20th Century's history are dying out at an increasing rate. Meanwhile, every generation since Generation Y (Millennials) has grown up a digital native: hyper-connected, extremely independent, technical, and diverse. Technology evolves so rapidly and constantly that even the youngest teachers are finding it a challenge to keep up. But the digital revolution has also revolutionised the concept of observation; we can capture events on film and share them globally at the touch of a button—although the emergence of 'deepfakes' and increasingly sophisticated Artificial Intelligence threaten both the credibility of



Images of the 'Histories of Belene' project courtesy of The Sofia Platform.

digital sources and to replace real evidence to change or create a dangerous false narrative. Despite that, digital technology is a democratising force, which can empower individuals and societies in utilising it to remember, further understand, and reflect on forgotten histories.

According to a survey carried out by our partners at the Sofia Platform, 24.1% of Bulgarians polled had a negative view of the Communist era, compared to almost double (41.1%) who had a 'rather negative' view of Bulgaria from 1989 to the present; in contrast, 43.8% held a 'rather positive' view of 1944-89, whereas a strikingly low number (19.4%) have a 'rather positive' view of post-1989 Bulgaria.¹⁴ This despite the fact that a higher proportion of those polled said they had 'little' (22.7%) or 'very little' (12.2%) knowledge of Bulgaria from 1944-89, compared to their country today (15.5% and 5.7% respectively).¹⁵

The Sofia Platform presented to our participants the 'Histories from Belene' programme, running since 2022; Belene was a Communist-run labour camp in Bulgaria; the biggest and longest-running, operating continuously from 1949 to 1987 and housing approximately 15,000 prisoners.¹⁶ Many Bulgarians are not aware of the camp's existence or history, but the project has sought to remedy this by interviewing six survivors. Utilising artificial intelligence, users can hold interactive virtual interviews with these survivors, asking via

microphone or typing questions which the algorithm connects to pre-recorded answers and speech; it is not used to invent any responses—the algorithm will simply try to match the questions to a pre-recorded topic, and if it cannot then the survivor will apologise for being unable to answer a question. Users can learn about the family lives of the survivors, the circumstances of their arrest and imprisonment, the conditions of the camp, and what Communism means to them.

While the technology is still developing, there is the possibility that detractors will accuse the recordings of being entirely artificial, 'deepfakes' or 'actors'. This is where the option to go on tours of the camp and meet these survivors is an important component of learning in more traditional interaction; materially experiencing the camp's remains and hearing testimony from living survivors in the room.

Providing the parallel experiences of in-person and digital interaction provides two major democratic advantages. Firstly, users can participate in this exploration of their history, interacting with contemporary witnesses as first-hand sources; the closest thing to having a conversation with the past without having to arrange the logistics of a live interview. Second, it allows the voices of those witnesses to be heard, sharing their experiences with a limitless online audience from any background, and long after the last witnesses have left us.

Conclusions

Populism and nationalism rely on distorted histories to thrive and appeal to popular feeling; they also rely on anti-democratic policies and methods to achieve their aims and maintain power, such as politicised History education. The legacy of communist regimes in Europe has been one of damage to critical thinking, authoritarian approaches to students, and highly politicised curricula which carefully include and promote subjects for national mythmaking or victimhood, omitting difficult themes and topics which do not fit the political agenda. At its worst, abuses of history have directly or indirectly led to ethnic tensions and, in Ukraine, armed conflict. While teachers and other educators in post-communist Europe may have limited influence or control over their education systems and textbook design, our workshops have found several recommendations for dealing with difficult History in the classroom and beyond.

1. Critical thinking: diversify historical sources

Teachers and educators need to engage in critical thinking for themselves, while nurturing this in their classrooms. This not only means diversifying source material around a subject, but also trusting their students with engaging with that material. Students will ask questions and voice opinions formed from friends and family, social media, established public narratives, emotional instincts and other sources; instead of obstructing, teachers should inculcate this demonstration of free-thinking, even by challenging it. Provide students with a variety of sources, especially when they are contradictory, and trust them to make their own judgments and analyses.

2. Beyond the textbooks: interactive methods

Students need to feel involved in the process of learning. They have access to wide swathes of information and are used to engaging with the world directly. Co-active methods such as role-playing games and recordings can appeal to them more than simply having to read from, and memorise, a textbook. Organising simulations of historic events in which students 'play out' certain characters or moments can help them become less passive and more motivated in their learning of history. School trips can also help students become more invested in the material they are learning about. When teaching difficult subjects like the Holocaust it can be helpful to present students with real 'lived-experiences' by showing them recordings of Holocaust survivor testimonies or by taking them to see Jewish graveyards and other memorials. These methods help to develop their empathy and, in the long-term, create more active citizens engaged in the democratic processes of their society.

3. Engage with students and their world

Teachers and educators (formal, nonformal and informal) must recognise the fact that students are not blank slates to simply write formal education upon; they must engage with and understand precisely what unofficial history students are learning from families, communities, and media-led assumptions about the past.

4. Broaden the lens: deconstruct national myths

National monuments often tell us more about the ideologies of the governments and/or individuals who funded and built them. An obsessive focus on national victimhood, glorified with biblical symbolism, not only keeps that community bound to a national myth, but excludes foreign visitors and ethnic minorities to whom these monuments have no relevance. History teaching should deconstruct national myths and be inclusive of the modern make-up of that society.

5. Confront controversial and dark pasts

History is the story of the human species. It helps us as a measure for human, or civilisational, progress, as well as a model for coping with the darker aspects of human nature. One of these aspects which appears to rise especially higher on the tide of populism is that of self-victimisation. All countries, peoples, and nations have, or descend from, a long past that contains controversial decisions and actions. The natural psychological preference is to treat oneself, or one's people, as a historical victim or hero; this is much easier than

confronting the stark fact that one can be a perpetrator or, more likely in the modern age, benefit from those who perpetrate war, suffering, atrocity on and the displacement of others.

Healthy democracies must be at ease with their dark pasts; this can only be done by open, public discussion and the willingness to listen to, and indeed to perhaps legitimise, various points of view about controversial subjects. Even more urgent is the fact that many nations within a region have shared pasts, the post-Communist Bloc region of Europe being our key example. When neighbours compete as to who was the greater historical victim, they lack cooperative application towards solving shared problems. When states take responsibility for historical errors or crimes, acknowledge, and apologise, it speeds up the reconciliation process between nations—such as for German-Polish and British-Czech relations.

6. Teach positive History

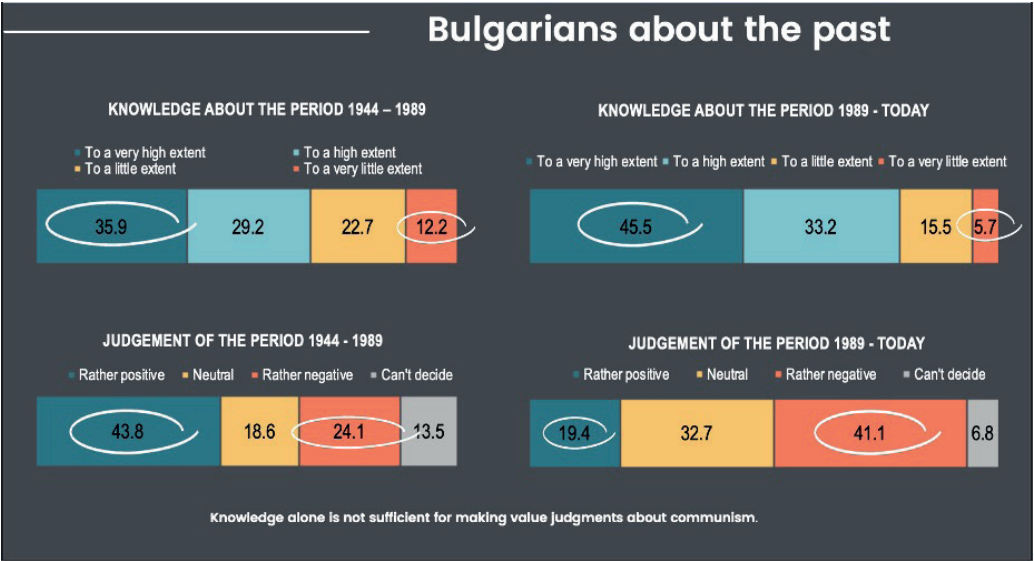
History should be applied to confront difficult and dark pasts, as well as bust national myths. But it is simultaneously unhealthy for any society to focus entirely on guilt, shame, and atrocity—for the individual and for the body politic. History—as the story of humanity—provides models for coping, as well as measuring progress: public education should not be made up solely of wars and repression. Instead, curricula and public exhibitions must also explore prosperous eras, great achievements, discoveries, and positive developments. After all, pessimists of the present day should have a strong and positive idea of the society or civilisation to aspire to.

Future of the Programme

Despite the recommendations above, key challenges remain. Time pressures on teachers and the need to meet exam criteria do not necessarily invoke critical thinking, diverse source material, nor unbiased approaches to subjects free of strong emotions. There is a limitation on the capacity of teachers and students alike in dealing with politicised curricula and meeting the criteria for good grades. The Teaching History programme endeavours to expand upon its existing network and utilise its connections for outreach to the higher-level policymakers within the region's education sphere. It will meanwhile work with its teacher network to workshop ways to adapt—if not cheat—the History curriculum as best they can for their classroom: addressing the gap between what *should* be taught with the time and resources provided and what *must* to be taught to achieve official success—from the position of both the students and the school. Finally, our workshops will seek to develop an understanding of digital citizens and the history they absorb in the age of TikTok, Instagram, X (Twitter) and elsewhere; learning to recognise what historical topics trend and stick with that audience, as well as what gets discarded or forgotten, as part of a wider understanding of why Europe's younger generation are leaning ever more towards populist and authoritarian politics. ■

Appendix 1

Source—2022 Alpha research study, The Sofia Platform;
see also <https://belene.camp/en/about-belene/> (bottom of page).



Endnotes

- 1 Maja Kurilić and Louisa Slavkova, 'Great Expectations: Demands and realities of civic education in Europe', *The Civics Innovation Hub* (2023), p. 55, https://thecivics.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Mapping-CE-in-Europe_Documentation.pdf
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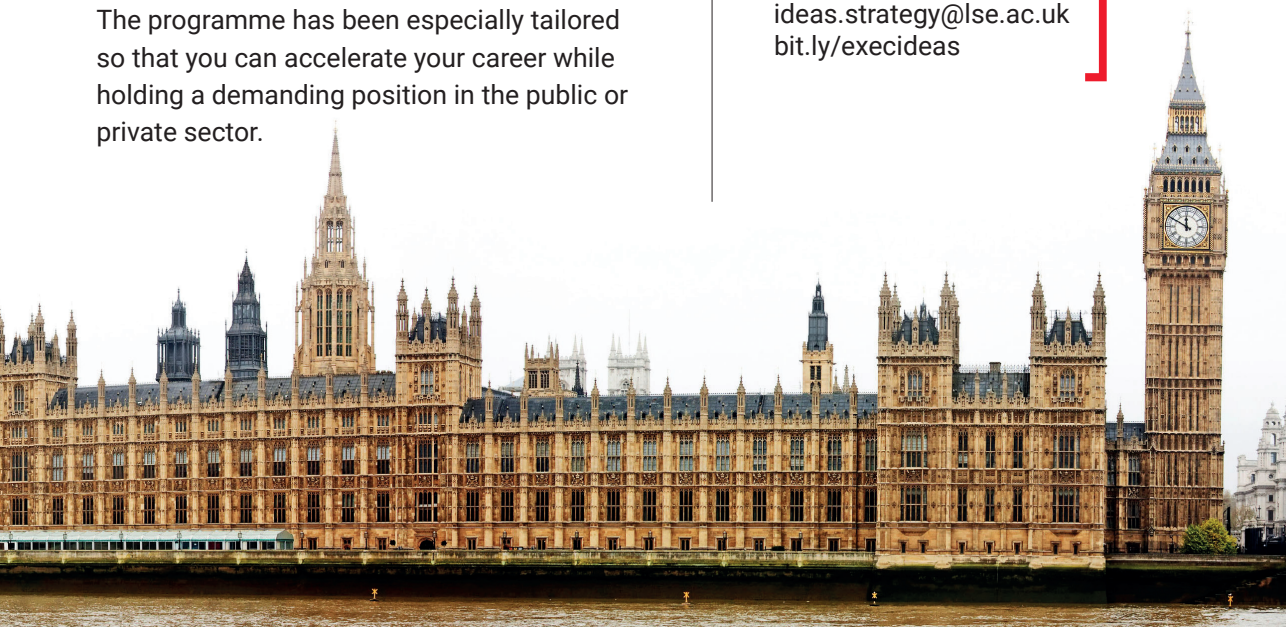
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