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Ratiu Forum
History Workshop Report

MARIA BRANEA

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The Ratiu Forum is a joint initiative by the Ratiu Family Charitable Foundation,the Ratiu Democracy Centre and the London School of Economics IDEAS Think Tank.

Romania and the Balkan region are priority areas of interest for The Ratiu Forum.

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The Author

Maria Branea is a Policy & Research Coordinator at the European Leadership Network working on European security and Russia-West relations. She previously worked as a programme associate at LSE IDEAS and the Romanian-based Ratiu Forum. While there, she assisted with the Russia-Ukraine Dialogues and the Central and South-East Europe Program, as part of which she coordinated the Journalism Program aimed at bolstering independent media in the region.

Introduction

The Ratiu Forum, a partnership between LSE IDEAS (London School of Economics) and the Ratiu Foundation, hosted the 2025 Teaching of History Workshop on Friday 16 May to Sunday 18 May 2025 at the Ratiu Democracy Centre in Turda, Romania. Focusing on History and Identities, the workshop brought together history teachers, relevant policy experts, and civil society representatives. The line-up of speakers included Carol Capiță, Raul Cârstocea, Irina Hasnaș Hubbard, Ioana Hașu-Georgiev, John Lotherington, Slobodan Markovich, Marko Šuica, Eric Beckett Weaver, and Lidija Županić Šuica. Discussions focused on the ways in which nation states shape and use historical narratives to justify their origins and policies and to develop a shared identity for their citizens. Participants discussed the role of new technologies, art, journalism, and humour in historical engagement and pedagogy, considering 'difficult' and minority histories as well as official ones. The overall impact of history education on civic engagement emerged as a key theme of the workshop.

Opening Remarks

The forum opened with an introduction by John Lotherington who situated history education against a moment of political flux in Romania, echoing the upheaval of the 1990s, and underscored the mutual reliance of historians and journalists in constructing collective memory. The discussion highlighted how emerging media technologies reshape narrative construction, accelerate both information and misinformation, and challenge educators to develop digital-savvy, critical thinkers. The session provided an overview of the forum's thematic pillars, namely integrating arts and civic education, teaching 'difficult' histories sensitively, and preparing for future issues like cyber security and peace-building. Participant introductions revealed a diverse network, from Holocaust scholars to digital artists, committed to bridging academic research and classroom practice.

The Christopher Coker Lecture

Professor Raul Cârstocea's lecture reframed fascism as a revolutionary, mass-mobilising ideology defined by mythic national rebirth (palingenesis) rather than a mere reactionary ideology confined to interwar Europe. Tracing its global variants, from Romania and Brazil to South Africa and Japan, the lecture demonstrated how fascist movements adapt local grievances into broad cultural wars, transcending economic issues. Prof Cârstocea connected historical fascist time politics—in the form of crisis, apocalypse, and rebirth—to today's far-right populism, noting that while contemporary extremists lack the utopian 'new dawn' idea, they share a focus on the nihilistic weaponisation of mass spectacle. The lecture concluded with a call to resist through solidarity, education, and genuine engagement with historical memory as means of defending democracies against authoritarian backsliding.

Shaping Historical Consciousness and Identity

Professor Marco Šuica argued in his presentation that history education must move beyond the memorisation of facts to the cultivation of critical thinking of broader historic knowledge. Prof Šuica argued that it is important to bridge past events with present realities and future scenarios to emphasise the continued relevance of history education. Focussing on fluid, multi-layered historical identities was presented as crucial, and teachers were urged to make full use of social media, memes, gaming, and other digital platforms to make history engaging for Gen Z and Gen Alpha students. The panel also tackled the challenge of nationalist and exclusionary textbooks, especially in Balkan contexts, and advocated for curricula that fairly engage with minority experiences. Prof Šuica framed inclusive, participatory teaching as essential not only for critical thinking but for nurturing democratic engagement, empathy, and trust between teachers and students.

Memes Workshop

Lydia Šuica workshop focussed on how humour and memes can act as entry points into otherwise daunting or polarising historical topics, reducing student anxiety and enhancing critical analysis. Through interactive exercises, such as an identity-mapping activity, stand-up comedy clips, and AI-generated images, she showcased how visual culture reveals power dynamics in society. Participants then created their own history-themed memes, learning to distil complex narratives into bite-sized, satirical commentary. The purpose of the exercise was to prompt a deeper questioning of the way in which biases and perspectives are created. The workshop concluded by weaving in ethical and spiritual dimensions, underscoring that creative tools must remain respectful and inclusive to foster genuine empathy and media literacy.

The Big Picture

Prof Carol Capiță's session explored the tension present within history education between teaching sweeping global narratives and grounding students in their local environments. Prof Capiță suggested the introduction of 'learning units' and local fieldwork to help students develop their understanding of otherwise abstract historical periods and perspectives. The discussion also raised awareness to political pressures resulting in fewer hours for history teaching and a narrowing focus on sensitive topics like the Holocaust or communism in Romanian schools. By embedding all eight European key competencies (linguistic, scientific, civic, digital, etc.) into history lessons, Prof Capiță argued, teachers can develop flexible and current curricula that foster democratic engagement and resist politicised, one-dimensional narratives.

Official History—The Case of Hungary

Focusing on the 1956 Hungarian revolution, Professor Eric Weaver's panel traced how the communist and later Orbán regimes alternately portrayed the upheaval first as a fascist insurrection, then as a heroic anti-communist stand. Prof Weaver thus exemplified the constructed nature of 'official' memory. The session also discussed how the Orbán regime has presided over the systematic takeover of universities, the emasculation of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, and the blacklisting of independent scholars through funding cuts and legal harassment. The talk highlighted how unchecked parliamentary power enables ideological appointments, erodes academic autonomy, and co-opts research bodies to reinforce a state-sanctioned, 'official' narrative. The session served as a cautionary tale on how constitutional control over education can help to entrench and justify authoritarianism.

Art as a Medium

This discussion centred on Ioana Hașu-Georgiev's documentary theatre project and Irina Hasnaș Hubbard's interactive exhibition, as examples of the way in which art can breathe new life into suppressed or marginalised histories. Ioana Hasu-Georgiev's project combined her journalistic and curatorial experience in the staging of a series of monologues based on oral histories of female anti-communist resistance in rural Romania. The pieces were performed in locations such as prisons which retained their emotional charge, evoking powerful reactions from the audience—especially those who lived through the Communist period, and sparking lively post-performance debates. Crucially, the organisers nurtured a spirit of openness and honesty, encouraging audience members belonging to different generations to engage with each other and the past, allowing for a cathartic exploration of difficult historic memories.

Hasnaș Hubbard's immersive art installations where students could handle original historic objects, create artworks, and engage in workshops all aimed at deepening empathy with the historic experiences of marginalised groups. Both speakers stressed the delicate balance between factual rigour and imaginative interpretation, arguing that interactive engagement with history through art can nurture personal investment in the past and a more multi-faceted view of historic experiences.

Hidden Identities

Professor Slodan Marković explored how symbolic landscapes such as monuments, street names, and architecture can be used in the creation of national identity by erasing proof of multicultural coexistence. Prof Marković looks specifically at the historic experiences of Salonica and Belgrade. He traced the systematic destruction of Ottoman mosques, synagogues, and cemeteries as a means of legitimising modern nation-state narratives, comparing this to invented traditions elsewhere, such as British monarchy rituals. The lecture emphasised that such symbolic traditions help to embed constructed historic narratives in the public consciousness, making them hard to challenge. Prof Marković called on teachers to reveal these hidden layers to their students, through archival sources, urban mapping projects, and the involvement of migrant or minority communities. Teachers can thus encourage critical awareness and develop a more nuanced and inclusive historical understanding in their students.

General Takeaways

History as Identity-Creation

The way in which political actors weaponise history to construct national identities and justify political decisions emerged inevitably as a recurring theme of the workshop. The writing and teaching of history have long been closely linked with nation-building and identity-formation efforts. This association is especially true, and dangerous, within the current resurgence of authoritarian and populist political movements worldwide.

Across various countries, from Russia and Hungary and to the United States, the independence of schools, universities, and teachers to engage with history critically and impartially, especially with 'difficult histories' that conflict with state-endorsed narratives, is increasingly threatened. Russian state narratives—depicting Ukraine as historically indistinguishable from Russia or as a subservient contingent part of the Russian civilisational entity—clearly showcase the way a selective reading of history can underpin territorial claims. Hungary offers another example, where history education has become increasingly centralised and politically dictated.

Authoritarian regimes often utilise nationalist, top-down approaches to history education to portray the nation in a positive light and to justify the state's political aims and actions. These simplified, exclusionary historical narratives usually marginalise minority groups and entrench polarisation. History thus becomes less a tool for learning, instead exacerbating cultural tensions within increasingly diverse modern societies.

Politicisation is a transnational issue. With fewer dedicated hours timetabled for history, teachers struggle to cover required content, let alone explore nuanced themes such as post-war transitions, minority experiences, and local heritage. Teachers also need to contend with the increasing primacy of new media and the prevalence of disinformation, historic and otherwise. 'Difficult' histories are even more prone to manipulation, and digital literacy is particularly important in engaging critically with such issues. However, many teachers lack up-to-date training in this area, and government cutbacks in professional development exacerbate skill gaps—sometimes applying an outdated approach to teaching 'digital' generations.

Democratic Engagement and Critical Thinking

Authoritarian governments seek to control history education because of the powerful part played by historical narratives in shaping national identity and political consciousness. When history is selectively taught or weaponised for ideological ends, it erodes civic literacy, weakens critical thinking, and undermines democratic engagement. The erosion of trust in objectivity and factual narratives, and the diminishing engagement with competing or difficult histories leads to an erosion of critical thinking skills which are crucial for erecting defences against political manipulation and disinformation. Engagement with contested memories and 'difficult' histories is crucial for fostering critical thinking, which in turn is a cornerstone of civic engagement and the maintenance of healthy democracies, with the right antibodies to resist authoritarianism.

Pedagogical approaches linking physical spaces to historical memory—such as those taking place in Belgrade digitally mapping Ottoman-era sites onto contemporary locations—can aid students in understanding that history is not a fixed, and often drily-presented, set of facts but an ever-changing process shaped by power, ideology, and interpretation. Encouraging critical engagement with monuments, museums, and even street names help foster a mindset that questions dominant narratives and seeks out marginalised voices.

In turn, this develops students' capacity for independent thought and civic responsibility. When students understand how and why history is constructed, it becomes harder for political actors to manipulate them. They learn to approach both historical sources and contemporary media with a critical eye. Ultimately, education that engages with difficult histories builds intellectual resilience and

empathy. It strengthens students' ability to participate in democratic life, not just by voting but by questioning, discussing, and contributing to public discourse. Without such an education, democratic institutions and societies become more vulnerable to authoritarian manipulation.

History and Journalism

Journalism, like history, is both a creator and a repository of public narratives and collective memory. Historians and journalists collect and analyse information, engaging critically with diverse material, taking into account provenance and context, drawing conclusions about certain periods with their distinct identities. Workshop participants underscored the mutually reinforcing relationship between history and journalism, emphasising how, by uniting forces, these two disciplines can help inoculate people against disinformation and manipulation, strengthening democratic engagement.

Journalists produce narratives under pressure which then shape public opinion in real time. Historians engage in research over much longer periods, producing deeper analyses. Bridging these two approaches can benefit them both and can shift political discourse away from inflammatory rhetoric to deeper discussions based in a better understanding of both facts and fluctuating trends.

Journalists and historians can join forces to combat ideological narratives and disinformation. Panellists highlighted successful partnerships where newsroom archives were opened to academic researchers, and historians served as expert commentators in media outlets. Likewise, the skills of historical analysis, evaluating sources, identifying bias, understanding context, are increasingly important for journalists themselves. As misinformation proliferates online, journalists must navigate a maze of manipulated content, misleading narratives, and weaponised history. Historians, who are accustomed to tracing patterns and interrogating sources critically, can help make sense of this landscape.

New Media

The rise of social media has fundamentally changed how information is shared, consumed, and interpreted, accelerating the spread of both information and misinformation. In the case of history, this shift has opened up both pitfalls and possibilities, challenging traditional teaching methods and requiring innovative approaches to helping students navigate the onslaught of information, both true and false, which they are bombarded with daily. Teachers must accept that students will engage with historical information and claims online, and they must equip them to do so critically and constructively.

Students increasingly engage with historical content on Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, and/or in online games. While allowing for informal learning, social media platforms also distort the past through simplified, sensationalised, or politicised narratives. However, there is also a growing emphasis rightly being placed on the arts, on humour, and on popular culture as tools for engaging students and bridging the gap between the 'digital' and 'non-digital' generations. Creative methods such as these can also diminish the divide between the classroom and students' lived experience. They can be useful in helping students engage with complex or 'difficult' histories by humanising the past, making abstract ideas tangible.

Moreover, digital literacy has become an essential skill in democracies increasingly destabilised by fake news and conspiracy theories. Students must learn to evaluate sources, detect bias, and recognise manipulation, whether in a history textbook or on social media. Integrating media literacy into history education helps students resist disinformation and engage responsibly in public discourse.

Humour and Memes

Humour, particularly humour for the digital age, can be a powerful pedagogical tool in engaging young people with complex and sensitive topics, including history, identity, and politics. When used thoughtfully and respectfully, comedy and memes can encourage critical thinking, reduce anxiety around difficult subjects, and make abstract or controversial material more accessible.

Modern online culture and trends reflect the fluidity and complexity of modern identity. Online platforms allow individuals to shift their affiliation between roles, perspectives, and communities, often through the medium of humour. Through engagement with these fluid and multiple identities online, students can better understand that individuals may belong to multiple, sometimes contradictory groups. This encounter with diversity and flexibility can help young people develop empathy and recognise the complexity of social groupings and identity formations; this is a cornerstone of civic education and engagement with complex, difficult, and minority histories. It challenges static notions of ethnicity, nationality, and belief—promoting a more nuanced worldview and, ideally, more tolerance.

When used in the classroom, memes can also prompt students to analyse historical narratives with a more critical eye. Within the framework of the workshop, critical thinking was depicted not just as scepticism but as a process involving breaking down information, questioning assumptions, recognising biases, and connecting ideas to real-life relevance. Ultimately, the use of memes and social media in history education is not about simplifying the past, but about making it interactive and accessible. When coupled with a broad curriculum, digital tools can help students move from passive absorption of facts to active engagement with historic, and by extension contemporary, narratives.

Art and Theatre

Art, theatre, and even memes may not be the norm in the panoply of tools used in the classroom, but they can be a useful way of bringing history out of the abstract and bridging the gap between the past and the lived experience of students, driving home its continued relevance. Art and humour can humanise distant and traumatic histories, particularly when they emphasise individual or 'micro-histories'.

Eliciting students to identity emotionally with a historic episode or period, especially in the case of recent history where testimonies can be shared in person by those who experienced it first hand, can be invaluable in getting them to engage meaningfully and empathetically with 'difficult' histories. An interactive, two-way discussion of historic events through non-traditional media—like theatre and art, rather than a top-down lecture—can make young people feel as though they have a stake in the past and in the preservation of collective memory. It can also supply a uniting thread between generations, building common understanding in a world increasingly divided by digital information bubbles.

Significantly, using art as a medium for teaching history and spotlighting individual stories and those of groups more often marginalised in traditional historical accounts, is more likely to engage students emotionally, encouraging empathy and critical thinking. In turn, considerations of diverse experiences and perspectives, in a period of political polarisation and disinformation which deepens social divides, is more important than ever.

Practical Next Steps

Bridging the Generational Gap

Generational differences undeniably impact how history is presented by teachers and how it is perceived and engaged with by students. 'Gen Z' (born between 1997 and 2012) and 'Gen Alpha', (born between 2010 and 2024) make up the majority of students. Teaching methods should therefore be calibrated to the expectations and experiences of modern students. Immersive, interactive ways of teaching—such as through art, theatre, and memes—have a much better chance of engaging the attention of students. Contemporary students are also increasingly interested in personal stories and complex individual identities. Teaching should therefore move away from an arid presentation of historical events, dates, and figures, and towards looking at personal experiences which humanise the curriculum.

Developing Media Literacy

Digital media and technology present both uses and challenges in teaching Gen Z and Gen Alpha. Media literacy should be embedded into history education, not as an add-on but as an integral skill. By learning to evaluate sources, question narratives, and recognise the ideological motives behind certain portrayals of the past, students develop critical inquiry and analytical thinking. History education can develop empathy while addressing problematic contexts such as violence, extremism, misinformation and political manipulation.

Educating Active Citizens

History education plays a critical role in creating thoughtful citizens. Understanding democratic institutions, processes, and rights is essential for engaging constructively in politics. History education plays a key role in developing this democratic capacity by teaching students about the complexities of democracy, the importance of participation, and the dangers of authoritarianism: suppression of dissent, distortion of history, and marginalisation of minority voices.

Promoting Emotional Engagement with Difficult Histories

Alongside analytical skills, it is important to develop students' imagination and emotional identification with historic period, groups, and individuals. The diversity of voices present at the workshop—teachers, academics, journalists, and artists from multiple countries— also illustrates how collaborative interaction and engagement enrich history education. Sharing perspectives and methods across disciplines and borders fosters innovative teaching strategies and a deeper mutual understanding, particularly in regions with complex historical legacies like Eastern Europe.

Safeguarding Academic Freedom

Finally, it is crucial that teachers have the academic freedom to apply these principles in practice. Given how closely linked history is with the formation of national identity, it is unsurprising that even democratic governments want to exercise some control over national curricula, with textbooks reflecting 'official' viewpoints. However, it is important that amongst all this, teachers still have the space to be creative and to impart to students an understanding of the diversity of national histories, including more painful episodes.

Conclusion

History, perhaps more so than any other subject, is interdisciplinary in and of itself. It is both politics and sociology, scholarly and civic education, identity-creation and individual lived experience. This composite nature makes it especially well suited both to adapt to the developing didactic expectations of modern teaching, bridging the gap between generations, between students and teachers, and allowing young people to engage on their own terms; be they digital, interactive, creative, or humorous, with the historic content on offer. In turn, the fluid, changing, and sometimes contradictory nature of historical narratives, and the critical skills which engagement demanded from so complex a field, can equip students with better antibodies with which to traverse the digital sphere of polarisation and growing intolerance. History education can endow students with analytical capacities, an understanding of the complex web of interpretation of the past, as well as of the lived experiences of diverse group and making it harder to fall prey to monolithic, nationalistic narratives aimed at manipulation and division. ■

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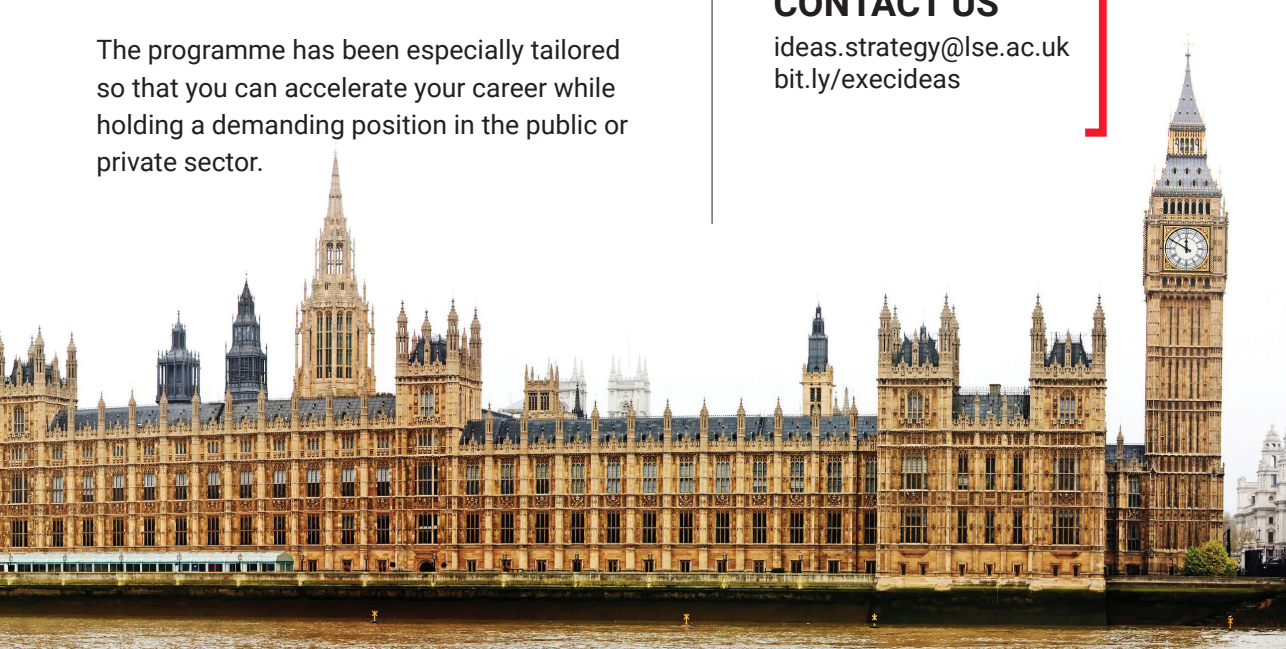

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LSE IDEAS
Floor 9, Pankhurst House
1 Clement's Inn, London
WC2A 2AZ

+44 (0)20 7107 5619
ideas@lse.ac.uk
lse.ac.uk/ideas