



**DIRECTORATE-GENERAL FOR INTERNAL POLICIES**

**POLICY DEPARTMENT B:  
STRUCTURAL AND COHESION POLICIES**

**CULTURE AND EDUCATION**

# **EUROPEAN HISTORICAL MEMORY: POLICIES, CHALLENGES AND PERSPECTIVES**

**NOTE**

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

## **Abstract**

This note seeks to provide some reflections on the challenges, current policies and possible future prospects of "historical memory" in a European context. Based on acknowledging the complex nature of collective memories in general and shared European historical remembrance in particular, including their susceptibility to political instrumentalisation, it is argued that a critical "culture of remembrance" needs to be developed. Such a culture requires increased efforts for nation states to come to terms with their own respective pasts in an unbiased way, yet at the same time embracing common European principles and values. In this context, the vital role of education as a tool to create an informed historical consciousness is emphasised, which provides the basis for dealing confidently not only with Europe's past, but also present and future.

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## **AUTHOR**

Markus J. Prutsch  
Policy Department B: Structural and Cohesion Policies  
European Parliament  
B-1047 Brussels  
E-mail: [poldep-cohesion@europarl.europa.eu](mailto:poldep-cohesion@europarl.europa.eu)

## **EDITORIAL ASSISTANCE**

Lyna Pärt

## **LINGUISTIC VERSIONS**

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## **ABOUT THE PUBLISHER**

To contact the Policy Department or to subscribe to its monthly newsletter please write to:  
[poldep-cohesion@europarl.europa.eu](mailto:poldep-cohesion@europarl.europa.eu)

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This note seeks to provide some critical reflections on the challenges, current policies and possible future prospects of “historical memory” in a European context, yet without laying claim to attempting to put forward an exhaustive examination of the issue. The text comprises the following constitutive parts:

- 1) an introduction, briefly outlining the characteristics and intricacies of the concepts of “historical memory” and “remembrance”;
- 2) an outline of the particular challenges involved in establishing forms of pan-European historical memory, and a presentation of current European Union practices;
- 3) an exploration of how future European memory policies might be developed in view of existing shortcomings, with particular emphasis being given to educational measures; and
- 4) a series of concluding recommendations.

### 1. Introduction: Historical Memory and Remembrance – a Complex Concept

“Historical memory” is widely considered to be a specific form of collective memory in scholarly literature and as such to be distinguished from individual practices of remembering the past. In that it helps to capture and arrange the past, historical memory serves above all the function of community building, especially in the context of rapid changes in society, politics, economy and culture. Yet while its being geared towards the past and providing a collective view as well as “sense” of the same is acknowledged to be a characteristic element, the concept proves to be elusive and suggests a number of challenges. Most importantly, historical memory is not necessarily about reflecting “historical realities”, but instead incorporates a distinct degree of subjectivity, given that the choice of how to remember the past necessarily involves value judgements. Accordingly, historical memory can potentially play a functional role, which exposes it not only to politics of memory, but also to the danger of it becoming a tool for a deliberate misinterpretation or falsification of history.

### 2. European Historical Remembrance: Challenges and Current Practices

Traditionally, collective historical memory has developed in close interaction with individual state- or nation-building processes. Three elements have emerged as being characteristic in this regard:

- I) there is a largely positive correlation between historical memory and nation (building) in that certain moments in a nation’s past are perceived as positive landmarks, or, less frequently, in that certain negative or even traumatic experiences of the past serve as a contrast to or justification for the present;
- II) historical memory is geared towards specific events in the past rather than “history” as such, thus allowing for a better accessibility of historical developments for a wider public, but also “essentialising” and simplifying the complexities of national histories; in connection with this,
- III) historical memory tends to elevate national history and create myths about it, thus turning a nation’s past into a sacred object.

However, not even at national level is historical memory-building an easy task, given the persistence of manifold cultural, social or educational divisions that are often only covered by the language of “one nation (state)”. In a supranational context, the perception of the past proves all the more heterogeneous and problems for having a collective memory or even defining common historical landmarks get multiplied.

European policies have nevertheless made an effort to foster a “European historical memory” in order to add legitimacy to the European project and foster European identity. While traditional reference points had been European “heritage” in a broad sense of the word, the Second World War as the trigger for European integration, and the achievements of integration *per se*, a new and more concrete focus has powerfully emerged over the last years, which puts the remembrance of 20th-century totalitarianisms – notably National Socialism and Stalinism – in its centre. Preceded by initiatives since the 1990s especially of the European Parliament to increase awareness for the Holocaust and, since the Eastern Enlargement, also Stalinist crimes, efforts to keep history alive are supported in particular by the Europe for Citizens Programme launched in 2006. The emphasis of European historical remembrance on totalitarianism is perpetuated in the on-going negotiations for a renewed Europe for Citizens Programme 2014-2020, in which the remembrance strand has taken on greater significance, reflected in the considerable increase of funds that have been earmarked for actions in this field.

### **3. Developing Future European Memory Policies**

At closer inspection, what might appear to be one coherent EU Memory Policy proves to be far from uncontested. Rather, there is still palpable competition between two at least partly competing memory frames: the “uniqueness of the Holocaust”, that has shaped Western European post-war culture, and the “National Socialism and Stalinism as equally evil”, that suits the needs of Eastern European nations to come to terms with their respective communist past. These differences are a reminder of the difficulties in settling diverging interpretations of the past not only across the political spectrum, but also between different Member States.

At the same time, concentrating European efforts for transnational historical remembrance on the Holocaust and National Socialism as well as Stalinism proves problematic in two respects. Firstly, such an approach fosters a biased black-and-white scheme of history that makes Europe’s “dark past” appear as the logical alternative to its “bright present”. Such a teleological and at the same time simplistic view not only does injustice to the richness as well as complex nature of European history and leaves out other crucial issues such as colonialism, but also hampers a better informed understanding of the European integration process. Secondly, narrowing historical memory to National Socialism and Stalinism, which are elevated to a negative foundation myth, reduces incentives at critically examining stereotypes and sacred cows of one’s own national history.

Accordingly, a critical “European culture of remembrance” rather than an imposed singular “remembrance culture”, with standardised views on and reference points of Europe’s past, is argued for. This requires capacities for a critical “reworking the past” at national levels to be generated, based on common European principles and values. Key requirements of the envisaged “culture of remembrance” include:

- approaching Europe’s past on the foundation of European core values, such as humanism, tolerance and democracy;
- creating an open sphere of discussion that provides for mutual understanding and reconciliation both within and between European nations;
- addressing also uncomfortable segments of national histories;
- basing judgements of the past exclusively on the examination of historical facts, while renouncing the notion of “historical truth”; and

- acknowledging the potential risks in legislating for a specific view on or memory of the past.

Such an approach would seem to do justice to the multiplicity of existing historical memories in Europe, while at the same time providing an incentive to scrutinise them through a shared transnational approach.

A particularly important role for such a “culture of remembrance” to develop is ascribed to education policies in Europe, which are required to:

- raise awareness for European diversity both in the past and present;
- entrust teachers and students with the means required to address their own countries’ history objectively and in broader (trans-)European contexts; and thus
- encourage young Europeans to become actively involved in discussing history and contribute to an informed historical memory.

To this aim, priority needs to be given to:

- I) adapting existing curricula and didactics by moving attention away from national to European and global approaches to history, and allowing young Europeans to form self-critical historical awareness through open and discursive teaching formats; and
- II) providing tailor-made (history) teacher training which fits with these needs.

While the European Union cannot do a “reworking of the past” for the Member States, it is certainly in a position to actively promote and support national efforts in this regard. For that purpose, the European Union cannot only make use of “soft power” to push Member States into taking action, but should also fall back on existing European programmes. These include the Europe for Citizens Programme, through which multinational history and remembrance projects can be funded, as well as the Erasmus Programme, which provides support for transnational exchange programmes and study visits both for students and staff. Nothing also speaks against expanding these Programmes in the future, or perhaps complementing them with other European action.

## **4. Recommendations and Conclusions**

The findings of this note are condensed in seven concrete suggestions:

- 1) Recognition of historical memory as an elusive concept;
- 2) Awareness-raising of difficulties of trans-European historical memory;
- 3) Acknowledgement of the EU’s achievements in raising awareness of the past;
- 4) Consideration of shortcomings of current EU memory policies;
- 5) Development of a European “culture of remembrance”;
- 6) Acknowledgement of the central role of education; and
- 7) Making utmost use of European means to support national policies.