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DRAFT REPORT

on European historical consciousness
(2023/2112(INI))

Committee on Culture and Education

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CONTENTS

	Page
MOTION FOR A EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT RESOLUTION.....	3
EXPLANATORY STATEMENT	7

MOTION FOR A EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT RESOLUTION

on European historical consciousness (2023/2112(INI))

The European Parliament,

- having regard to Article 165 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union,
 - having regard to its resolution of 19 September 2019 on the importance of European remembrance for the future of Europe¹,
 - having regard to its resolution of 2 April 2009 on European conscience and totalitarianism²,
 - having regard to Regulation (EU) 2021/692 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 28 April 2021 establishing the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values Programme and repealing Regulation (EU) No 1381/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council and Council Regulation (EU) No 390/2014³,
 - having regard to the study conducted for its Committee on Culture and Education entitled ‘European Historical Memory: Policies, Challenges and Perspectives’⁴,
 - having regard to the study conducted for its Committee on Culture and Education entitled ‘European Identity’⁵,
 - having regard to Rule 54 of its Rules of Procedure,
 - having regard to the report of the Committee on Culture and Education (A9-0000/2023),
- A. whereas Europe’s complex, conflict-ridden and contested past poses both a challenge and an opportunity for European integration;
- B. whereas gender-, belief- and ethnicity-based injustices have been inherent in European history over many centuries, including in the form of antisemitism and antigypsyism;
- C. whereas history must never be relativised, distorted or falsified for political purposes;
- D. whereas historical negationism represents a major threat that kindles distrust and conflict between peoples and nations and undermines efforts to nurture historical justice and reconciliation;

¹ [OJ C 171, 6.5.2021, p. 25.](#)

² [OJ C 137 E, 27.5.2010, p. 25.](#)

³ [OJ L 156, 5.5.2021, p. 1.](#)

⁴ [Study – ‘European Historical Memory: Policies, Challenges and Perspectives’ \(second edition\), European Parliament, Directorate-General for Internal Policies of the Union, Policy Department B – Structural and Cohesion Policies, April 2015.](#)

⁵ [Study – ‘European Identity’, European Parliament, Directorate-General for Internal Policies of the Union, Policy Department B – Structural and Cohesion Policies, April 2017.](#)

- E. whereas dealing with the past requires utmost impartiality, objectivity and dispassion both in historical scholarship and the political realm;
- F. whereas historical memory incorporates a distinct degree of subjectivity, given that the choice of what to remember and how the past is interpreted necessarily involves value judgements;
- G. whereas while there are ‘historical facts’ grounded in professional historical work, there is no single monolithic, indisputable and everlasting ‘historical truth’ that one specific group or nation can monopolise and exclusively claim for itself;
- H. whereas fostering a critical historical consciousness across borders by educational and other means is central for Europeans to be able to come to terms with their past, confidently deal with the present and work towards a common future;
- I. whereas European historical consciousness is understood as an individual as well as collective ability and skill to understand, (self-)critically assess and learn from history, which facilitates the recognition of the inextricable connection and interdependency between past, present and future;

Dealing with Europe’s (dark) past as a risk and an opportunity

1. Acknowledges that the diverse and often conflicting histories of European nations and states make any effort to deal with history at a supranational political level a difficult and potentially dangerous endeavour, and that attempts to regulate how to commemorate and interpret the past always prove to be challenging;
2. Emphasises the potential of the principle of *historia magistra vitae* and considers especially the dark elements of Europe’s history – including totalitarianism, racism, jingoism and colonialism – not only to be a vigorous reminder of past mistakes whose repetition is to be avoided, but also as a call to work jointly towards democratic and inclusive societies in the Union and globally;
3. Considers a responsible, evidence-based and critical dealing with history a *sine qua non* for any democratic body politic, in order to sensitise current and future generations for achievements and aberrations of the past alike, strengthen a self-reflexive public discourse and foster understanding and reconciliation within and among particular social groups, nations and states;

Politics of the past in the European Union – a critical assessment

4. Stresses the need for an honest assessment of the EU’s ‘politics of the past’, through which it has striven to add legitimacy to the European project and strengthen a European sense of belonging, by equally acknowledging achievements and existing shortcomings;
5. Acknowledges the array of past and present initiatives at European level to foster a common European historical memory, including Holocaust Remembrance Day, the European Day of Remembrance for Victims of all Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes, the establishment of a dedicated remembrance strand in the former Europe for

Citizens and current Citizenship, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV) programmes, and various Parliament resolutions such as the one of 19 September 2019 on the importance of European remembrance for the future of Europe;

6. Expresses its concern that there continues to be a latent competition and partial incompatibility between different memory frames and remembrance cultures in the Union, especially between Western and Eastern Europe;
7. Recognises that the Union's concern mainly with narrating a story about itself *ex negativo*, with the horrors of the past and especially National Socialism and Stalinism serving as a 'negative foundation myth', provides a strong sense of purpose for the European project, yet bears the risk of nurturing a teleological and simplistic black-and-white scheme of history which potentially hampers a fully informed understanding of Europe's intricate past and reduces incentives to challenge stereotypes and sacred cows of national histories;

Towards an informed historical consciousness in Europe

8. Recognises the need for a broader and more holistic understanding of European history for a (self-)critical European historical consciousness to emerge, in particular by widening the focus of current European remembrance initiatives;
9. Stresses the importance to move away from a European 'remembrance culture' that is predominantly top-down and concerned with defining what Europeans should remember towards a bottom-up and citizens-driven 'culture of remembering' based on common European principles and values, concentrating on developing capacities for a critical reworking of the past at national and European levels;
10. Acknowledges the crucial importance of approaching Europe's past on the foundation of European core values such as humanism, tolerance, democracy and the rule of law, and of creating an open sphere of discussion that also makes it possible to address difficult elements of national histories and that provides for mutual understanding and reconciliation both within and between European nations;
11. Calls on the Member States to revise current curricula and teaching methodologies with a view to shifting focus from national towards European and global history and in order to allow for more emphasis on a supranational historical remembrance, in particular by allowing for multiple interpretations of the same historical period and event and by fostering corresponding teaching styles that favour reflection and discussion over knowledge transfer and that are guided by the overall objective of making students learn 'how to think' rather than 'what to think';
12. Calls on the Member States to provide tailor-made (history) teacher training that enables teachers to grasp transnational aspects of history, imparts adequate didactics and principles of modern teaching and is primarily concerned with forming self-reflective young people;
13. Calls on the Commission and the Member States to strengthen the tools currently available at European level in order to foster a (self-)critical European historical consciousness, in particular the Erasmus+ programme, which supports mobility and

intercultural learning as key tools to increase understanding of other cultures and nations, and the CERV programme, which provides support for transnational historical remembrance projects and promotes civic engagement;

14. Requests that the European institutions, the Member States, educational institutions and civil-society actors step up efforts to abstain from and repudiate any attempt to instrumentalise history for political purposes and fight historical denialism both in the European Union and beyond;

Outlook: the legacy of the past and the EU's future

15. Espouses the ideal of a 'culture of remembering' and historical consciousness based on shared European values and practices in approaching the past, yet at the same time avoiding any undue levelling or simplification of history;
16. Expresses its hope that on the basis of critical self-reflection relating to history and historical responsibility at national level, a truly European reflective discourse on the continent's past may emerge, with history not being abused for power-political purposes;
17. Envisions national collective memories eventually contributing to and merging into a European public sphere, with national remembrance cultures complementing each other rather than being in competition, and dealings with history becoming an issue of civic rather than political action;

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18. Instructs its President to forward this resolution to the Council and the Commission.

EXPLANATORY STATEMENT

The intrinsic value of ‘historical consciousness’ emerges from the underlying assumption that the knowledge of history is not only a value in itself, but informs our understanding of the present and additionally guides us in our attempts to shape the future.

Indeed, historical consciousness helps us interpret the past, but it also assists us in our understanding of who we are, where we are positioned in time, and how we act as participants in continuing the story that will eventually make a historical record. In other words, historical consciousness does not only assist in developing a sensitivity *towards* and an understanding *of* the past, but also increases a self-awareness of ourselves, as Europeans in relation to history.

A critical review of the past should not, however, be limited to emphasising the victims of authoritarian and totalitarian regimes; it should reassess all dark sides of European history, including colonialism, racism, violations of human rights and gender-based historical injustices.

With this in mind, the present report of the European Parliament on “European historical consciousness” is structured in four parts:

- The first part (*Dealing with Europe’s (dark) past as a risk and an opportunity*) acknowledges the importance of dealing with history in a responsible and critical way as a *sine qua non*, as an intrinsic need to learn from our past.
- The second part (*Politics of the past in the European Union – a critical assessment*) underlines the danger of nurturing a teleological and simplistic narrative of history in which the horrors of the past serve as a ‘negative foundation myth’ for European integration.
- The third part (*Towards an informed historical consciousness in Europe*) seeks a well-informed historical consciousness in Europe and outlines possible avenues that will achieve this objective.
- The fourth and last part (*Outlook: the legacy of the past and the EU’s future*) embraces the idea of a new ‘culture of remembering’ that nurtures historical consciousness based on shared European values and practices.

1. Dealing with Europe’s (dark) past as a risk and an opportunity

As Jacques Delors correctly recalled on several occasions, European citizens “cannot fall in love with the single market” (1989).¹ In order to develop a sense of a common belonging, work on collective memory is indispensable, since collective memory is a central aspect of group identity being formed and strengthened.

¹ Delors, Jacques (1989). *Statement on the broad lines of Commission policy presented by Jacques Delors, President of the Commission, to the European Parliament and reply to the ensuing Parliamentary debate*. Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities (Bulletin of the European Communities; Supplement 1/89), p. 6.

There is not, however, one particular European collective memory. The memories of the nations and peoples that compose the EU are filled with wars, conflicts and disputes. For the formation of a collective memory, we therefore need to indulge in a process of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (‘coming to terms with/working on the past’), notably to redress the past in a critical and meaningful way both at Member States and EU level.

2. Politics of the past in the European Union – a critical assessment

Historically speaking, we should not consider Europe as a homogeneous civilization and geopolitical space. This kind of perception of the past, as Norbert Elias observed even in 1939, builds on the tradition of orientalism, colonialism and anti-communism.² What must be the ultimate aim of European memory policies is not to develop an imagined sense of a shared past, but to have a clear direction for the future of the EU and to strengthen a common sense of European belonging.

Giorgio Agamben rightly asserts that if the idea of Europe has any meaning, it consists of the fact that the Europeans – unlike Asians and Americans – “can gain access to their truth only by means of confrontation with the past, only by settling accounts with their history”.³

As the President of the European Council Herman Van Rompuy stated in 2013: “In Europe, we sometimes overlook the weight of recent history; how people in some parts of the world look at us.”⁴ Two studies requested by the European Parliament’s Committee on Culture and Education titled “European Historical Memory: Policies, Challenges and Perspectives” and “European Identity”,⁵ the findings of which this report is based upon, clearly demonstrate that – while the past is often referred to in official EU discourses – ‘difficult pasts’ are not sufficiently addressed at European level.

It is a fact that, on some occasions, the European Union tends to put aside the memories of the cruelty of European colonialism and imperialism for the sake of economic cooperation and interests. It is of utmost importance that we avoid this kind of selective approach to the past and also dare to confront the many unpleasant elements of our histories.

It is also a fact, however, that the EU has made conscious efforts to deal with Europe’s difficult past(s); it is involved in undertaking memory work and dedicates substantial resources to achieve that aim.

3. Towards an informed historical consciousness in Europe

We must avoid building European collective memory solely on a negative foundation myth, since this hinders the critical examination of the past.

The European Union is a community of destiny (*Schicksalsgemeinschaft*), and it should be

² See Elias, Norbert (1939). *Über den Prozeß der Zivilisation (2 vols.)*. Basel: Verlag Haus zum Falken.

³ Agamben, Giorgio (2019 [1942]). *Creation and Anarchy: the Work of Art and the Religion of Capitalism* (translated by Adam Kotsko). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, p. 8.

⁴ Van Rompuy, Herman (2013). “Europe in the World”. *Lecture by President of the European Council Herman von Rompuy at Regent’s University in London* (EUCO 189/13), p. 6.

⁵ Prutsch, Markus J. (2015 [2nd edition]). *European Historical Memory: Policies, Challenges and Perspectives*. Brussels: European Parliament, Directorate-General for Internal Policies of the Union; Prutsch, Markus J. (2017). *European Identity*. Brussels: European Parliament, Directorate-General for Internal Policies of the Union.

understood as such and not as a community of one shared collective memory. This is how the ‘historical journey’ of Europeans needs to be seen.

Here lies the importance of historical consciousness: it is an adequate tool that helps us to conceptualise how we comprehend and relate to history; it helps to acknowledge the historicity of our circumstances. In other words, it assists in developing an ability to interpret and recognise the past in the form of history. Historical consciousness enhances the ability to utilise experiences and to make sense of contemporary situations and identifications⁶. ‘History’ is not the sum of past facts, but it is the meaning produced after conceptualising and working through the facts. Arguably, history is ‘self-knowledge’.

4. Outlook: the legacy of the past and the EU’s future

Memory work at EU level must not be used as a form of soft power to express political positions or defend political interests. Thinking about history is a form of orientation in relation to the present and the future⁷. Hence, the main purpose of history teaching should be the formation of historical consciousness as both a collective and individual capacity.

Overall, the report espouses the ideal of a ‘culture of remembering’ and historical consciousness that is based on shared European values and practices in approaching the past, yet at the same time avoids any simplification of history.

⁶ Popa, Nathalie (2023). “How Meaning Making Cultivates Historical Consciousness: Identifying a Learning Trajectory and Pedagogical Guidelines to Promote It”. In: *The Social Studies* 114:4, pp. 139-159, here p. 142f.

⁷ Nordgren, Kenneth (2019). “Boundaries of Historical Consciousness: a Western Cultural Achievement or an Anthropological Universal”. In: *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 51:6, pp. 779-797, here p. 791.