

How can Europe Help the Balkans Consume its History?

Taking a closer look at history education in South East Europe

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House of European
History
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Event Report

“How can Europe help the Balkans “Consume” its History?”

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The project will be implemented with the financial support of the Austrian Development Cooperation as part of the initiative “NETUCATE – Networked education creating a skills web for participation and sensitivity.”

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Project Summaries:

ePact: Education Partnership for Advocacy, Capacity-Building and Transformation is a partner project with CDRSEE, Centre for Democracy and Reconciliation in Southeast Europe. This project aims to instrument change within the schooling systems in the Western Balkan region in order to intensify democratic education, critical thinking among the students and to encourage active citizenship. This project seeks to enhance conflict sensitivity and sustain the democratization process in the region through these economic reforms. Partners from within the region include: History Teachers Association of Montenegro (HIPMONT), History Teachers Association of Kosovo (SHMHK), History Teachers Association of Macedonia (ANIM), Association for Social History of Serbia (UDI), Albanian History Teachers Association (ALBNA), History Teachers Association of Bosnia and Herzegovina (EUROCLIO HIP BiH). This project is implemented with the financial support of the Austrian Development as part of the initiative “NETUCATE- Networked education creating a skills web for participation and sensitivity, 2015-2018.”

This project brings together education experts, teachers and representatives of educational authorities in the Western Balkan region to craft a wide-ranging needs assessment. This needs assessment survey will enable our researchers for this project, Dea Marić and Rodoljub Jovanović, to identify the main challenges facing teachers in the classroom and what teachers need when dealing with sensitive and difficult matters such as the Yugoslav wars in the 1990s.

Learning History that is ‘not yet History’

In the 1990’s the Balkans – specifically former Yugoslavia - experienced a series of traumatizing and gruesome wars. As the memory of the wars is still quite fresh in people’s memories, it is still a very sensitive subject in the region. The main question driving the project “Learning History that is ‘not yet History’” is how to teach history of recent wars, even though they are often not yet considered history. The wars are remembered in so many different ways and have been investigated in great detail in the context of transitional justice, but how can educators teach this subject to students in a meaningful way?

In addressing this question, the goal of this project is to create a unique partnership among teachers and their associations from former Yugoslavia. Transnational teams will collaboratively create a free ready-to-use learning resource about the 1990s Yugoslav wars. This resource will explore how this history should be addressed in a multi-perspective way; how war impacts developed societies and everyday life; and to what extent history educators can also address current wars across the world through the lens of the experiences in the wars of the 1990s. Underlying the project’s aims is a desire to contribute to the field of European remembrance through raising the awareness among teachers, students and pupils that common approaches to the very sensitive past are possible, so that they can highlight and disseminate the idea that common remembrance is possible in their own countries.

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Introduction

It is often said that Winston Churchill believed that “the Balkans produces more history than it can consume.” Besides the fact that this quote is incorrectly attributed to him, and that it was originally made in reference to Crete, it nevertheless resonates very well with all those involved in the promotion of responsible history education in this region. There is a visible difficulty for the established public and political cultures to refrain from using historical interpretations and concepts as divisive tools, or worse – using history as a weapon. But, what does it actually mean when a society ‘consumes’ history? And if we acknowledge that ‘dealing with the past’, ‘facing history’, ‘overcoming’ and so on entail the proper ‘consumption’ of the past, which history should be dealt with, by whom and how?

Yet, we too easily forget that the school history teacher has to somehow prepare young people for wrestling with the many political, cultural, ethnic and ideological interpretations, and (ab)uses of the past. Can this teacher do so while working for those same political rulers which (ab)use this subject? Does this teacher have the right tools and resources, and – perhaps the most important question – does society even desire that the teacher does so? As one of the most politicized school subjects, little to nothing is left to the professional community, and history curricula as well as textbook production cycles are eagerly controlled, or at least protected from a wider reflection, orientation and ownership by a broader professional community, which includes teacher trainers, historians, teachers, educators, assessment experts, and didactics.

Looking at history education, the way in which it is organized, prepared, and delivered from this angle may ultimately support the region to not only consume the history produced, but build a larger appetite amongst their students. Not however to simply ‘get the narrative’, but to be equipped with the complex understanding of the creation of multiple narratives.

Event Summary

Opening words and Opening Panel

The one-day event started with opening words from Constanze Itzel, Head of Unit at the House of European History, Costa Carras, Joint History Project rapporteur to the board of directors at the Centre for Democracy and Reconciliation and Jonathan Even-Zohar, director of EUROCLIO. Each of the speakers welcomed participants to the event and expressed their enthusiasm for meaningful and interesting discussion which was to follow.



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Following the Opening words came the first Panel Discussion of the day which discussed “How can Europe build on common cultural heritage and history in the Western Balkans?” The panel was moderated by Jonathan Even-Zohar and contained of four panel speakers;



Davide Berton – European Commission, DG NEAR, Chapter Desk for Education and Culture
 Diego Marani – European Action Service, policy coordinator for Cultural Diplomacy
 Pavel Tychtl – European Commission, DG Migration and Home Affairs, Europe for Citizens Programme, policy officer
 Walter Zampieri – European Commission, DG Education and Culture, Head of Unit

Every panelist was asked a different question in regards to their affiliation to the Western Balkans

in their personal and professional life. The questions revolved around the relationship between the EU and remembrance in Europe.

Research in the Balkans: state of play and ways forward on reform of history education and reconciliation

Throughout the day two separate new research reports in the field of teaching and memory of the Balkan wars of the 1990’s was released.

The first publication “What happens in the Classroom? Teachers, teaching practices and controversy across the Western Balkans” by Dea Maric and Rodoljub Jovanović, was written in the context of the EUROCLIO project ePACT – Education Partnership for Advocacy, Capacity-Building and Transformation. The report deals with trying to answer questions on how to navigate teaching history in a post-conflict space. As the writers reiterated in their presentation introducing the report: “There is a visible difficulty for the established public and political cultures to refrain from using historical interpretations and concepts as divisive tools, or worse – using history as a weapon”.



The report aims to discourage the use of history in a divisive way, instead looking to promote teaching history in a way that fosters critical thinking and active and responsible citizenship. It takes the discussion directly to educators working in the field, assessing their views and suggestions on how to appropriately promote competence-based and learner-focused learning that facilitates inclusive and democratic history education in the region.

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Another new research report “Process of Reconciliation in the Western Balkans and Turkey: A Qualitative Study” was presented by Anja Gvozdanović and Vanja Kukrika. This study was conducted within the CDRSEE project “Divided Past, Joint Future”, and focusses on attitudes and opinions of citizens, representatives of public, private and civil sector on peace building and the process of reconciliation as well as the role of civil sector in those processes in various countries in the Balkans. The study aims to strengthen connections between countries in the Balkans that experienced war and make peace and reconciliation more attractive to stakeholder groups like NGOs, citizens, the business sector, the public sector etc. The study shows that transnational justice still has many negative connotations with citizens in the Balkans and that critical assessment of the role of countries involved in war is still missing, making civil society fragmented and contested, underlining the important role of responsible history education in society.

Best practice of regional cooperation for dealing with sensitive and controversial history



After a tour of the House of European History, two further projects were presented to the audience. To kick off the second half of the day, Judith Geerling, senior project manager at EUROCLIO, and Lucija Balikić, President of International Students of History Association (ISHA), presented the research found through the project “Learning History that is Not Yet History.” Lucija Balikić presented the preliminary results of the survey; “Yugoslav Wars as viewed across Europe” which found that different

countries in Europe have differing views on the origins of the Yugoslav wars. Judith Geerling proceeded to present the “Repository and preliminary recommendations by and for history teachers in countries affected by war.”

This was followed by a presentation by Costa Carras, CDRSEE, gave a speech about the Joint History Project. This project aims to change how history is taught in Southeast Europe in order to achieve peace and reconciliation in the region. Through the project, four history textbooks have been written and translated into 11 languages.



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Concluding panel: How could Europe help the Balkans “consume” its History?

The closing panel of the day, consisting of Lucija Balikić (ISHA), Costa Carras (CDRSEE), Jonathan Even-Zohar (EUROCLIO), Martí Grau Segú (House of European History) and Markus J. Prutsch (European Parliament), moderated by Pavel Tychtl (European Commission), concluded that there is a need to replace the current “mythical” thinking by critical thinking. It was noted by Lucija Balikić that the first steps toward transcending national narratives are already being taken. Academics call for a common



history, institutionalizing the diverse history of the Balkans with a non-emotional, non-nationalistic approach. Unfortunately, she remarked, this approach is not supported on a political level, leaving it limited to a small academic (elite?? WORD?). Building onto this notion, it was remarked that currently history is not being taught based on collective identity. The focus mainly lies on the individual identity of countries, fragmenting the region and causing

history to be taught from an emotional national(ist) perspective. Education like this is based on a negative foundation (the idea of “never again”) which does not encourage a historical dialogue and critical assessment and reflection of different roles in war. A positive foundation – education based on a joint cultural identity – can assist in bringing different and difficult histories together, to not only consume history, but to digest it as well.

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