

Teaching Controversial Issues Across Europe: Political Sensitivities, Classroom Challenges, and Current Teaching Strategies



Think Tank

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Introduction

In recent years, there has been an increase in societal polarization as well as conflicting narratives within history. Societal polarization includes ideological division as well as a fragmentation of a shared truth and history is becoming increasingly more politicized. Societal polarization and conflicting narratives within history have a big impact on today's society (Mutz, 2006). It possibly impacts the democratic discourse which includes reduced mutual understanding or increased conflict and opposes a difficulty in establishing a shared historical understanding. History specifically is targeted as it shapes national identity and collective memory (Sunstein, 2008). These broader societal developments are not isolated from educational environments.

These polarizations and conflicting narratives are also perceived by children and adolescents and possibly taken to the educational classroom. The younger generation may be exposed to information from social media, which is not always true. Consequently, their civic as well as their identity development can be influenced. Overall, children and adolescents are still forming their identity, and they may have a limited ability to critically evaluate sources (Alscher et al., 2022). Moreover, the democratic participation can be threatened, and the formation of values, beliefs and attitudes can be influenced (Hess, 2009). That is why education is getting more important and plays a crucial role in this area. It is important that educational rooms are safe environments and knowledge is being transferred. Within this broader educational responsibility, history education is particularly important.

History education increasingly engages with topics that are complex, sensitive, and often contested. Issues such as colonialism, (religious) conflicts (e.g., Gaza or Iran), migration, and identity evoke divergent interpretations and strong emotional responses, making them inherently controversial, sometimes even taboo. In this context, controversial topics refer to issues that evoke disagreement due to differing interpretations, values, or limited consensus. There is a great difficulty as such topics are often closely tied to students' identities, beliefs, and lived experiences, which can intensify emotional responses. While addressing such topics is essential for fostering critical thinking and democratic citizenship, it also presents significant pedagogical challenges. Avoiding these topics, however, risks reinforcing misunderstandings and limiting students' ability to engage critically with societal debates. Furthermore, stereotypes can be reinforced, students lack the skill of debate, and they might accept misinformation. Given these tensions between necessity and difficulty, it becomes crucial to understand how teachers navigate these issues in practice. The present

study was conducted in collaboration with EuroClio, the European Association of History Educators, which focuses on engaging learners in innovative and responsible history and citizenship education (EuroClio, 2001). The organization conducts research on the needs of teachers, supports educational resources, or organizes professional development courses. They are relevant in this context as they have a European scope and show expertise in history education. In collaboration with EuroClio, a group of students from Radboud University investigated the role of controversial topics within history education. The aim was to identify which topics are controversial and to understand the challenges the teachers face with those topics. Qualitative interviews were conducted with history teachers across Europe to gain in-depth insights into their experiences and classroom practices. This study addresses an important research gap by examining how history teachers across European educational contexts deal with controversial topics in their classrooms.

Theoretical Framework

2.1 Defining Controversial and Sensitive Topics

Defining what constitutes a controversial issue remains central to this field. Roberts (2013) and Fry (2018) would characterize such issues as those involving disagreement rooted in insufficient evidence, differing interpretations, competing values, or ethical considerations. This distinction highlights that some controversies may be addressed through empirical inquiry, while others require deliberation and (political) debate. In parallel, Whitten (1993) draws attention to the role of student identity and diversity, noting that while engagement with controversial topics can promote inclusion and critical reflection, teachers may avoid them due to uncertainty in managing classroom dynamics.

The distinction between ‘controversial’ and ‘taboo’ topics further complicates classroom practice. Evans, Avery, and Pederson (2000) argue that culturally sensitive issues, which are usually the ones most closely connected to students lived experiences, are often the most difficult to address, which makes them controversial. Whereas other topics are actively made taboo by, for example, the state, because they are deemed a threat to the status quo and are therefore controversial and difficult to discuss.

2.2 Challenges

Existing scholarship, which largely originates in the United States, identifies several recurring challenges that teachers face when teaching controversial and politically sensitive topics. Lusk and Weinberg (1994) demonstrate that students may hesitate to participate in discussions on controversial issues due to perceived power imbalances, fear of academic consequences, and concern about peer reactions. These findings underscore the importance of creating a classroom environment in which students feel able to express diverse perspectives. Similarly, Romano (2012) emphasizes the role of teacher neutrality and, therefore, careful use of evidence-based materials in fostering a sense of safety and acceptance during classroom discussions. This shows that teachers need to find a balance between teaching controversial issues while remaining neutral, which can cause difficulties for teachers specifically. Kello (2016) mentioned that teachers can feel unprepared or fearful of emotional reactions when teaching controversial topics. The paper generally highlights that historical teaching is tied to national identity, which can make it more difficult to handle certain topics neutrally. Not only, the teacher may also decide what is included in their lessons because it has been shown that curriculum content is influenced by decisions made at the governmental or institutional level, which determine what is included, emphasized, or avoided, often reflecting political or societal priorities (National Academies of Sciences & Medicine, 2024). These challenges directly influence how teachers position themselves.

2.3 Teacher Positioning

Teacher positioning is important when teaching controversial issues, as they are the ones needed to get it across to the students. Teacher positioning refers to how teachers deal with those controversial topics and how they position themselves while teaching. Research by Kello (2016) explored how Estonian and Latvian teachers navigate those controversial issues in their classrooms and found five primary distinctions. The first one is hiding or avoiding. Some teachers try to avoid issues due to time constraints, pedagogical difficulties, or personal disagreements with the curriculum. Some tactics in this distinction were to stick to facts or avoid the topics entirely (Kello, 2016). The second distinction is to find common ground or smooth edges, where teachers acted as mediators between the perspective from the sources or curriculum given and the students' perspectives. Using that perspective, they aimed to represent multiple views and that the truth can be position-bound (Kello, 2016). The third

distinction was to just do their job, which means that the teacher represented the historical view from the textbook or the curriculum (Kello, 2016). The fourth distinction is to enhance heterogeneity, which includes utilizing personal stories from students with different ethical backgrounds through surveys or classroom discussions to foster multiperspectivity (Kello, 2016). The last distinction is leaving the truth open. This position emphasized that students should learn the expected interpretations from the textbook or curriculum but not necessarily adopt that as their personal truth. The emphasis lies on the discussion of opinions instead of finding a correct answer (Kello, 2016). These different strategies show how different approaches can be within different classrooms. Some positions are more active and open, while others are more passive and controlled. This can have severe impacts on the development of children or adolescents dependent on how they were taught.

2.4 External Pressures

Teachers are not the only influence on students,, as external pressures also play an important role. Zimmerman and Robertson (2018) add that external pressures, including public distrust in the pedagogical role of teachers and the immense spread of misinformation and conspiracy theories on the internet, intensify these challenges while simultaneously making the avoidance of such topics increasingly untenable. They emphasize the importance of equipping students with the skills to distinguish between evidence-based arguments and unfounded claims and put abundant emphasis on the advice to not go into discussion about any ‘alternative facts’ that might be posed. Other factors that were mentioned are the social and political pressure teachers perceive (Öntas et al., 2021). More specifically, participants in that study mentioned school administrators or parents, as well as the current polarized social agenda. Due to that, some of them mentioned that they feel reluctant to bring controversial issues into the classroom to avoid conflict (Öntas et al., 2021).

2.5 Controversial Topics

It is not only important to consider external pressures and the role of teachers when teaching controversial topics, but also to investigate what topics are controversial and which are not. It would be important to consider that different topics create different reactions among students and possibly require different strategies. A study by Uygun and Arslan (2020) asked 203 students from a province in Turkey to identify controversial topics students feel should be discussed in the classroom. They also compared their opinion based on demographic factors. The results show that the most desired topics with high interest were human rights, multiculturalism, election systems, animal rights, and freedom of press (Uygun & Arslan, 2020). Undecided topics which students were unsure or neutral about were privatization, income distribution, fanaticism, religious communities, and cloning. Lastly, the least desired topics were terror and violence which could indicate that it possibly has a negative emotional impact and a tense social atmosphere (Uygun & Arslan, 2020). Regarding demographics: gender, parental background, personal habits, and the families' economic situation influenced the students' views (Uygun & Arslan, 2020). These findings indicate that while students show interest in certain topics, their willingness to engage possibly varies based on the nature of the subject and their various demographic factors.

2.6 European Context and Research Gap

Taken together, this literature reveals enduring tensions between neutrality and engagement, as well as between the risks, but also the necessity of addressing controversial issues in school-like environments. However, the predominance of U.S.A.-based studies, most of which are also not too recent, highlights a gap in understanding how these dynamics operate within contemporary European contexts as only limited research has investigated specific areas within Europe.

This study contributes to existing literature focusing on a European perspective. It will not limit its scope to just one country but tries to incorporate broader views to find possible differences between European countries. It will also give empirical teacher insights through the qualitative method being used. Moreover, it will give teachers more insights and possibly help them navigate those controversial issues better in their daily life. It could also help governments or other institutions to design a more well-rounded curriculum, so no topic is specifically excluded. This report addresses that gap by examining the experiences and practices of

European history teachers of all walks of life, teaching students of all walks of life, and specifically seeks to answer two research questions:

RQ1: What parts of the curricula are becoming more politically sensitive across Europe?

RQ2: What topics are challenging to teach for teachers across Europe?

RQ3: What obstacles do teachers face when discussing those topics and what current strategies do they use?

Methodology

To properly answer our research questions, we conducted qualitative research in the form of in-depth interviews with several European history teachers. The two key variables of the present study are politically sensitive / controversial issues in the curriculum, and the way in which history teachers currently deal with these in class and the strategies they might use for this. Based on this, ten interview questions were formulated (see Appendix 1), some of which included fixed follow-up questions. As can be seen, other topics that are potentially related to the research question, such as social media and colleague discourse, were also reflected in the questions. Each question had been carefully formulated with the aim of the research in mind. Moreover, the order had been designed in such a way that we would obtain answers that are as comprehensive as possible.

Ultimately, a total of 12 participants (of which eight men and four women) were recruited, on the condition that they must be employed as a history teacher and that they must live and work in a European country. Specifically, we interviewed one teacher from Albania, one from Denmark, one from Hungary, one from Malta, one from Northern Ireland (United Kingdom), one from Serbia, two from Portugal, two from Spain and two from the Netherlands. This participant number and country selection were a result of the individuals who eventually showed an interest in participation. Since the study was in collaboration with EuroClio, 10 of these participants were recruited from the organization's own network. The two Dutch participants were personal contacts of one of our researchers and thus external non-members, which enabled us to have more participants. The geographical spread was intentional – we hoped to gain insights from as many (cultural) European areas as possible. From all interviewees, it could be concluded that they had been teaching history for at least 19 years. In

addition, the types of institutions that they taught in (for example, primary / secondary / high school, and public / religious / private school) varied per participant.

The participants were approached via their email addresses, retrieved from their registration within EuroClio. In this invitation, we introduced ourselves as well as the objective of the research. The latter was done explicitly; the study's aims that were like the research questions were clearly stated, so that the participant could develop a certain motivation. Those who responded with interest received a follow-up email, and an interview date was subsequently arranged with each of them and their designated interviewer. A consent form for use of data was filled out by each participant. Each interview was held online (via Zoom) and individually, except for one in which two trainees of the teacher joined, and two in which two of our researchers interviewed one teacher. The interviews were conducted during March and April 2026, and their lengths ranged between approximately 35 and 90 minutes. Most of them had English as the working language, but four were held in the native language of the participants (Dutch, Croatian and Serbian), and two occasionally code-switched from English to Spanish. To safeguard reliability, we tried to minimize our influence on participants' answers by avoiding asking leading additional questions. We recorded the interviews either on our mobile phones or with the Zoom recording feature and later used the corresponding audio files to transcribe them. Some interviews were transcribed fully manually, while some were transcribed using an AI transcription service (Descript) for convenience, and manually corrected afterwards.

Eventually, all transcripts were coded. For this, we made use of Thematic Analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2012). Following its six-phase approach, we retrieved the findings of the investigation. The actual coding proceeded as follows: in a spreadsheet, we created 10 rows per interview, with one interview question per row. The columns were used to note down the segment (relevant unedited text, taken directly out of transcript), the open coding (concise summary of segment and meaning) and the categorisation (overarching keyword for one or more open codes across all interviews) respectively. Several times and with all researchers, we discussed the approach to the coding process, aiming for as much consensus as possible, after which each researcher coded their own held interview(s). Subsequently, following deliberation and reaching mutual agreement, the final categories were created together by the researchers (see Appendix). The remainder of this report will be dedicated to analysing and comparing these categorized findings. During all processes mentioned in this section, we have adhered to the EuroClio (ethical) guidelines regarding informed consent and data confidentiality.

Findings

Based on the 12 interviews, five themes were identified that highlight how teachers navigate politically sensitive topics and manage these discussions in the classroom. These findings explore the history teaching profession, controversial topics in the classroom, the biggest challenges for current teachers, teacher strategies, and miscellaneous aspects.

4.1 Profession as a History Teacher

We started off with a question about the participants' personal views on being a history teacher. Their responses were coded as either positive or negative: the majority of the interviewees expressed positive feelings about being a history teacher. Many described their profession as meaningful and tied to their passion for history, education, and the development of students. This sense of purpose was often connected to the idea of preparing students for life outside the classroom. For instance, a Spanish teacher explained that the role of a history teacher is to help students understand the past to navigate in the present and make informed decisions for the future. Furthermore, an interviewee from Malta (P8) emphasized that history teaching helps students "understand themselves and the situations that they will be in in the future."

Several teachers also highlighted the pedagogical aspects of the profession. They noted the importance of *preparing students for participation in society, encouraging empathy, and developing critical thinking*. One interviewee from Spain stated that they would like to be a teacher all their life because of their love for history and storytelling. An Albanian teacher (P9) described history as a subject that is constantly evolving and therefore remains interesting to teach:

"History is always going on, and not changing but going on, and that's why it is interesting."

There were, however, two teachers who expressed more negative or critical views, with one of them being from Eastern Europe. A participant from Northern Ireland, argued that fewer people are interested in becoming teachers today and that many would likely pursue other career paths instead. Another interviewee (P5) referred to the government's expectations of history teachers, explaining:

"This Hungarian government said that the most important job of history teacher is that you should form the kids' national identity."

Despite these critical perspectives, the majority of participants viewed the profession positively and saw it as a source of *personal fulfilment* and *responsibility* that helps students understand both the past and present.

4.2 Controversial Topics in The Classroom

To gain insight into what teachers deemed to be controversial we asked the question *which areas in the field of history education have become more politically sensitive in your country?* The respective teachers had differing answers; however, they could be summarized in 7 categories: human rights (e.g. LGBTQ+, immigration), (domestic) politics, wars, national history, colonialism, totalitarianism, and international developments (current worldwide issues) to gain a well-organized view. Because of the qualitative method we used during our research, we are aware of the fact that these categories are not perfect, and it must be noted that there is a certain overlap between the categories. For example, when teachers included immigration to be controversial in the classroom, it inherently belongs to the category of human rights and simultaneously to domestic politics. In the following paragraphs, the categories which are the most common in teachers' answers will be analysed first, the least common categories will be analysed at the end.

The three most given answers among the teachers are national history (11 out of 12), domestic politics (10 out of 12), and international developments (9 out of 12). Controversial themes among national history include a wide variety of categories, which vary from a country's history with wars to the separate category of colonialism. Teachers from Spain stated that the Franco regime and the civil war of the 1930's are still very controversial. Especially people who didn't grow up in the Fascist regime of Franco, tend to romanticize it. Another controversial theme that belongs to national history is colonialism and is more apparent in 'Western European' countries.¹ In those countries, such as the Netherlands, the history of slavery and the country's role in it are controversial topics. The debate is about in what kind of degree should it be included in the curriculum? Some people want to decolonize it; others state it was just a black page in the country's history and should move on. Overall, the subject of World War II and its aftermath is in each country controversial. Albania, Hungary, Portugal and Spain share that they all had

¹ In this research, 'western countries' are all the countries except the interviewees from Albania, Hungary and Serbia. In this case, we make a distinction because we see a difference between these two regions of Europe.

an oppressive regime (communist or fascist), and the effects of these regimes are still visible in the classroom. ☒

“I think that memory is a controversial issue in our country.” - Spanish teacher.

Secondly, domestic politics. This category is a result of the developments of the national history of each respective country. Ten out of 12 teachers stated that they experienced (domestic) politics as a controversial topic in class. Subjects included in this category are form of leadership, current governmental issues (e.g. immigration), polarization in society and the rise of conspiracy theories. Immigration being more controversial can be traced back to the rise of the right in Europe, and it being an important electoral theme in the last 10 years. Teachers acknowledge that social media is a big contributing factor in the rise of political polarization and tension in history classrooms. Thirdly, international developments are divisive topic in the classroom. The events and aftermath of October 7th, the status of Palestine, the war in Iran and radicalization in global politics are just the biggest topics that are controversial in class currently. This third category becomes especially more controversial the older the students get, and how knowledgeable they are about the rest of the world.

“So now it has become more common for very, very ugly words to appear on Facebook and elsewhere on social media. I think, in the end, it is ugly for all foreigners.” - Danish teacher.

Lastly, half of the teachers stated that human rights topics, wars, and colonialism were controversial. One in 4 teachers concluded that totalitarianism is controversial – these teachers come from Spain and Hungary, where totalitarianism in some ways was present in the last 50 years and have a big impact on today's society. Concerning human rights being a controversial topic, it was mostly the case in Western European countries, where the curricula of those countries give room to discuss those topics. Some students however, for example in discussing LGBTQ+, have ideological objections to it. The same goes for racism in classrooms, making these topics discussable by teachers can lead to a rise of tension in class.

Regarding the freedom of the curricula, the only country in which the government completely determines what the history teacher covers is Hungary. It does not even have a department of education. Instead, the department of interior rules what is to be covered and what not. There is simply not enough time to finish the curriculum to talk about other topics, such as human rights, which makes it difficult for the teacher to implement it. In all the other countries, the curriculum is either produced by the government and is transparent according to the teachers, or it is up to the teachers themselves what to include. Nine out of 12 teachers are

of the opinion that these topics should be contextualised to a certain extent. Three of them didn't think that this is a role for the history teacher – discussing it however seems important to those teachers.

“So right now, we live in a world where academic thought is now criticized from a point of view which I never thought it will be criticized.” - Hungarian teacher.

4.3 Biggest Challenges for Current Teachers

The interviewees were asked about the biggest challenges they face in teaching history and contested subjects. Almost all of the participants referred to growing polarisation and the rise of extreme ideas, including conspiracy theories, nationalism, misogyny, and anti-immigration sentiments. They described how these developments increasingly influence classroom discussions and students' perspectives. In addition, nine participants identified social media and online information gathering as a significant challenge, especially because of the spread of misinformation. Two interviewees also indicated that teachers lack sufficient training to deal with these sensitive and controversial issues in the classroom.

Multiple teachers described polarisation as one of the main challenges within education. One Dutch participant explained that it is becoming more visible in the classroom and creates difficulties in maintaining respectful discussions and a safe learning environment between students. Similarly, other interviewees referred to the growing influence of extremist ideas and more radical political views. A Spanish teacher mentioned fascism and tensions surrounding immigration as difficult topics, while a teacher from Northern Ireland (P3) highlighted the growing influence of misogynistic online influencers on teenage boys:

“We have a lot of teenage boys that are affected by these so-called influencers.”

Another recurring theme was social media as a source of misinformation. Teachers expressed concern that students rely on social media instead of books and documentaries. One Spanish interviewee (P1) stated:

“Social media is kind of competing with what we do with the classroom.”

The teachers explained that students often bring misinformation and polarised ideas from social media into the classroom. An Albanian participant described social media as “the worst enemy of history” because of the amount of disinformation students encounter online. Moreover, the difficulty of handling sensitive subjects while remaining neutral was also noted as a

challenge. A Portuguese teacher (P2) explained how difficult it can be to remain neutral when extremist or discriminatory views are expressed:

“It’s very difficult to try to discuss this as a totally neutral subject.”

The same participant argued that many teachers are not sufficiently prepared to deal with these issues. This concern was also raised by another Portuguese interviewee (P10), who stated:

“Teachers need to be very well equipped to continue to develop a critical history teaching.”

The findings suggest that current history teachers experience challenges related to polarisation, misinformation, and the influence of social media, while also feeling the pressure to maintain a safe and objective learning environment.

4.4 Teacher Strategies

All twelve teachers interviewed indicated that they use certain strategies in the classroom to defuse tension surrounding controversial topics. Among these, three strategies emerged as most common. The strategy used most frequently by the participants (seven out of twelve) was engaging in a debate with the students. One teacher (P10) explained why debating is particularly important for students when dealing with controversial topics and how they address this in class:

“Well, we want to develop their ability to interpret. We use various sources and materials, and sometimes we guide them to compare different perspectives on topics and also discuss them in a somewhat artificial way, but presented as a real-life situation, just as it happens in debates”.

Other commonly used strategies to reduce tension in the classroom included disciplinary actions such as one-on-one conversations with students (or their parents if necessary) and creating a safe environment within the classroom. In addition, many teachers described their role primarily as that of a facilitator who should remain neutral. Rather than imposing opinions, they encourage students to explore multiple perspectives and form their own opinions. One teacher from The Netherlands (P6) specifically pointed out that sometimes it is simply not possible to reach everyone while teaching:

“The third core value is that you can’t reach everyone. In a group of young people, or adults, or people you work with, you have a broad middle group, and you have the extremes, and those extremes hold extreme views, and you shouldn’t focus too much on them. It’s great if you can involve them, but you have to focus on the broad middle group and ensure there’s consensus that those extreme opinions shouldn’t play a role in the whole picture”.

There was no major difference in which countries these strategies were implemented. This is because most strategies were used by various teachers across Europe. Therefore, these strategies are not necessarily linked to a specific region in Europe or a national context.

Furthermore, teachers were also asked whether they believed any one particular strategy was the most effective to address controversial topics during their lessons. Most participants gave a clear and defined answer to this question (eleven out of twelve). One teacher emphasized the complexity of the classroom dynamic, finding it difficult to isolate a single most effective strategy. Most teachers indicated that a combination of different strategies was most effective for addressing controversial topics during lessons (ten out of twelve). A teacher from the Netherlands (P7), for example, emphasized the importance of utilizing multiple strategies:

“I don’t think you ever use just one. I think it’s always a combination of several things. The whole picture. Well, maybe it’s not about a strategy, but perhaps more about an attitude that you shouldn’t try to change people’s minds”.

The strategies most frequently identified as effective were creating a safe environment (mentioned by 8 of the 12 teachers), teaching students to think critically (mentioned by 7 of the 12 teachers), and holding debates (also mentioned by 7 of the 12 teachers). These findings suggest that most teachers do not rely on a single strategy on its own but often try to combine them with others.

The findings also reveal regional overlap in Europe regarding teachers’ preferences for the strategies they utilize. Teachers from the Netherlands and Denmark (Northwestern Europe) both emphasize that the most effective strategies are multiperspectivity and creating a safe environment in the classroom. There is also some overlap in the Balkan region, as teachers from this region were the only ones who viewed engaging in (physical) activities as an effective strategy for addressing controversial topics. For example, one teacher from Albania (P9) mentioned that they occasionally invite guest speakers to their history classes:

“Okay, we don’t have too many opportunities to take students out of the classroom. But we do have some freedom to invite, for example, witnesses. At our school, on February 17, we invited a person who was there in Kosovo during the war in Kosovo, and that sparked an interesting discussion with the students about what war is like.”

One of the final questions asked of the teachers was whether they are encouraged to offer a multiperspective approach when teaching controversial topics. Most teachers indicated that they are indeed encouraged to do so (ten out of twelve). One teacher from Malta (P8) highlighted the importance of using multiperspectivity in history teaching:

“Yes, absolutely. It is central to history teaching, along with empathy and avoiding anachronism”.

Some participants indicated that they are not encouraged to apply a multiperspective approach (two out of twelve). However, both participants provided different reasons for why they do not feel encouraged to do so. A teacher from Serbia (P11), for example, indicated that the guidelines say little about how the curriculum should be taught and that it is primarily up to the teacher how they deliver the curriculum:

“I don’t know if there are any guidelines, honestly. If there are, I don’t know them, so I can’t say that there are or there aren’t. But somehow, a person feels for himself how much he can explain something. It’s more reliant on oneself.”

Another teacher from Denmark (P12) noted that while it is important to share both the positive and negative aspects of history, it is not the teacher’s role to dictate what people should or should not believe. That is something the students must decide for themselves:

“That’s science; it’s a different thing. I focus on positive things and on negative things, and in the end, I don’t think it’s my place to tell people what to believe or think. You need to teach them what they have, and they choose what they want to be in life and work.”

Overall, the findings show that most European teachers are encouraged to adopt a multiperspective approach when addressing controversial topics. In doing so, teachers emphasize the importance of debate, critical thinking, and creating a safe environment in the classroom as key methods for managing tensions and encouraging open discussion.

4.5 Miscellaneous aspects

Out of all 12 interviewees, six provided additional comments. Many of them viewed the current challenges not only as difficulties but also as opportunities for growth and improvement in teaching.

A Spanish teacher (P4) stressed the importance of adapting teaching to contemporary developments, such as new technologies and artificial intelligence. Rather than seeing these changes only as problems, they can also be understood as opportunities:

“For me, it’s important to change with the new times ... introduce social media, ICT, computers, and artificial intelligence. It’s a big problem now, but maybe it’s a problem or maybe it’s an opportunity.”

An interviewee from Portugal highlighted that teachers are part of a broader educational system and that, if they really focus and continue to evolve, they can contribute to the development of history teaching in meaningful ways. They also argued that the difficulties and challenges of history are precisely what makes it interesting.

A further final remark was the need to teach students to understand the past within its historical context. A teacher from Malta (P8) emphasized the importance of anachronism:

“Students often judge the past using modern values. It’s important to understand historical decisions within their original context.”

Additionally, an Albanian teacher commented on the social changes which affects students, including individualism and reduced social contact due to phone use. They suggested that schools and teachers can help by creating more opportunities for students to socialize with one another.

Finally, a Serbian participant pointed to the influence of family narratives and political ideas on students’ understanding of history. They argued that these influences need to be critically addressed in the classroom through the use of historical sources. Teachers recognize significant challenges but also see opportunities for change and positive educational development.

Discussion

This study explored how political sensitivity is reshaping history education across Europe, examining which curricular topics teachers find increasingly contentious, what challenges those topics create, and how teachers navigate them in practice. Twelve qualitative interviews with teachers from nine different European countries were conducted to answer these questions. Across these interviews, controversial topics turned out to be inseparable from the curricula they sit in which subjects count as sensitive depends partly on what the curriculum makes room for and what it leaves out, and the freedom teachers have to address them varies sharply across European countries. In short, teachers highlighted national history, local politics and international developments as the most politically sensitive. These perceptions varied evidently per national context. Overall, Teachers see their role as meaningful but politically loaded, which is the lens through which the discussion should be read. They utilize a broad scale of strategies to approach sensitive topics effectively. External pressure is involved in classrooms, however, does not lead to avoidance of controversial topics per se.

5.1 Politically sensitive topics defined

Several historical topics were perceived politically sensitive according to the interviewed teachers. National history, politics (domestic politics was named 83% by the teachers) and recent conflicts (international development, 75%) were named the most across all interviews. These topics involve history that is not yet “finished” and are ongoing themes in the present. Roberts (2013) and Fry (2018) distinguish empirical controversies from controversies of values/interpretation. National history, politics and international developments fall squarely in that second category: there is no resolution possible because the interpretation is value-based and it touches students' identity directly (Whitten, 1993). For national history, the strongest explanation for the findings comes straight from Kello (2016): history teaching is intrinsically tied to *national identity*, which makes it hard to handle neutrally. Building on, domestic politics is a logical extension of national history into the present. Current debates (e.g. immigration, polarization) draw on the same national narratives which is sensitive for students. International developments play a specific role that does not apply to the other two topics, namely recency. October 7th for example, is history in the making. There is no textbook interpretation yet for teachers to fall back on, which may leave them empty-handed and feel unprepared (Kello, 2016).

The perception on which topics are perceived as politically sensitive varies sharply by country and these differences reflect the specific political history and curriculum of each country. Firstly, Western European countries, especially the Netherlands and Spain, named colonialism as a prominent sensitive topic. The debate around the slavery past and the extent to which the curriculum should be decolonized is currently a relevant issue in these countries. In post-authoritarian countries (Albania, Hungary, Portugal, Spain) on the other hand, totalitarianism and the heritage of fascism or communism come forward more clearly. Participants from these countries pointed out that the effects of these regimes are still visible in the classroom, sometimes even in the form of romanticization by students who did not experience the regime themselves. World War 2 and its aftermath was named controversial across all countries measured, but consistently with a notional coloured tone.

Hungary forms an exceptional case. Here, the curriculum is fully determined by the department of interior, and the Hungarian participant explicitly stated that the government sees forming the national identity of children as the most important task of the history teacher. In contrast to other countries, where teachers had freedom to address controversial topics, we see in Hungary the definition of what counts as ‘controversial’ is institutionally enforced. Kello (2016) already touched on this by showing how history teaching is closely tied to national identity and how the political context determines the room teachers must navigate. The current study refines that work, with Hungary as the clearest example of how institutional context can fully reshape the boundaries of what controversial means in the first place.

Other themes like human rights and LGBTQ+ were mentioned by half of the teachers. However, identity was not absent; it is the underlying axis that forms the basis of multiple categories. As mentioned, national history is measured in all countries and it is closely tied to national identity: The Franco-regime in Spain, Colonial history of the Netherlands, and the communist heritage in Hungary and Albania are all examples in which the sensitivity arises from how these histories greatly form the current national identities. Whitten (1993) and Evans et al., (2000) already confirmed this occurrence, they stated culturally sensitive topics are often the hardest to discuss due to their impact on the experience and identity of students. The conceptual contribution of the current study argues that identity is not a category on its own, but rather the common underline that links national identity, colonialism, totalitarianism and human right themes.

5.2 Obstacles teachers face

While teachers in our sample viewed their profession as meaningful, they consistently described their classrooms as harder to navigate than before. The obstacles they face today can be clustered into three layers: societal, informational, and internal-pedagogical layer. These layers do not operate independently but rather together as they form the conditions under which any teacher strategy must operate.

At the societal level, ten out of twelve teachers identified growing polarization and the rise of extremist ideas as a defining feature of their current classrooms. Topics such as immigration, gender, and political extremism were repeatedly described as creating tensions in class and in particular when students brought these positions in from political debates and online figures outside of school. This supports Öntaş et al. (2021) on social and political pressures shaping teacher experience. At the informational level, nine teachers identified social media as the primary channel through which such framings reach students. Several teachers noted that students are increasingly influenced by political debates and online figures outside of school: one Albanian teacher even called it "the worst enemy of history". Online misinformation intensifies the teaching of contested issues (Zimmerman and Robertson, 2018). At the internal-pedagogical level, teachers described a difficulty that no curriculum can solve for them: how to remain neutral while still responding to extremist or discriminatory remarks from students. Two Portuguese teachers explicitly noted insufficient training, with one arguing that teachers need to be very well equipped to continue to develop a critical history teaching.

Although the findings show that the layered external pressures strongly influence how teachers approach controversial topics in the classroom, our European sample suggests that external pressures do not necessarily cause teachers to avoid controversial topics altogether. Instead, they described adapting their methods and focusing more on critical thinking and creating space for discussions. Furthermore, most teachers explained that they shape their teaching methods by focusing more on moderation. Classroom freedom was only limited by institutional and political pressure in some contexts, such as in Hungary.

5.3 How teachers respond: dominant strategies

The findings show that our teachers across Europe use a variety of strategies when addressing controversial topics in the classroom. The teachers reported using strategies to defuse tension around the topics and ten emphasized that combining strategies is more effective

than relying on any single one. Three strategies stood out as the most used and effective. The most commonly mentioned strategy was facilitating debate and discussion. Teachers explained that discussing different perspectives in the classroom helps students develop critical thinking skills and learn how to engage with others in a respectful manner. This aligns with Romano (2012), who argued that evidence-based discussion can contribute to a safer and more open environment in the classroom. Teaching critical thinking also directly counters the misinformation layer by training students to evaluate the sources they encounter online.

Another important strategy according to teachers was creating a safe classroom environment. Eight teachers addressed students' reluctance to engage in the first place. Students should feel comfortable expressing opinions without fear of judgement or conflict. This supports Lusk and Weinberg (1994), who found that students may hesitate to participate in controversial discussions because of fear of peer reaction. Together, these strategies map onto the three obstacle layers identified earlier. Teachers' methods are not generic pedagogical tools but specifically measured responses to the conditions in today's history classrooms.

Underlying these strategies sits multiperspectivity: presenting a historical topic through multiple, sometimes conflicting viewpoints. Ten of twelve teachers reported being actively encouraged to adopt. We have identified multiperspectivity as a stance rather than another strategy technique, because the actual strategies rely on it. Debate works because perspectives are pluralized and safe environments are needed precisely because multiple perspectives must coexist in a classroom. This connects to Kello's (2016) teacher typography positioning. Most teachers in our sample took the more open of Kello's positions: they actively brought in different perspectives and left conclusions open, rather than avoiding the topic or simply presenting the textbook view. Unlike the topics themselves, the strategies teachers use show little regional variation: they draw on a shared European pedagogical collective.

5.4 Limitations

The sample of twelve European history teachers is somewhat small and not representative for the whole of Europe. Most countries only had one interviewee to represent its country, generalizing their insights nationally can be argued. Other than that, ten out of twelve participants were from the EuroClio pool, which might suggest they are more conscious of the themes history teachers face today. All participants had at least 19 years of teaching experience, lacking young or starting history teachers' perspectives.

Furthermore, the interviews were conducted in different languages. Although all transcripts were carefully translated, transcribed, and coded, subtle differences in interpretation or meaning may still have occurred during the analysis process. Lastly, because the study focused exclusively on teachers, the perspectives of students themselves were not included, even though students form an important part of classroom dynamics surrounding controversial issues.

5.5 Practical implications

The findings of this study carry several practical implications for history education across Europe. Firstly, the results demonstrate the importance of providing teachers with sufficient training on how to approach certain controversial and politically sensitive topics in the classroom. Multiple teachers indicated that they often feel insufficiently prepared to hold classroom discussions about sensitive topics, misinformation, or extremist viewpoints. Professional development, such as workshops on navigating sensitive discussions could help bridge this gap. Pre-service teacher education programs could also incorporate explicit training on facilitating controversy in classrooms.

Secondly, the findings suggest that schools should recognize the educational value of discussing controversial topics, rather than avoiding them completely. Teachers consistently mentioned how these discussions contribute to critical thinking, participation, and students' ability to understand multiple perspectives. School-level policies should actively create space for such discussions rather than leaving them to individual teacher initiative.

Thirdly, the growing role of social media and thus misinformation emphasizes the need for stronger media literacy education in history classrooms. Students increasingly encounter historical narratives and political information online, making it detrimental that these students learn how to critically evaluate sources. Integrating source-evaluation skills directly into history lessons would allow students to apply critical thinking to the very narratives they encounter outside the classroom.

5.8 Future research

Future research could further expand on understanding controversial topics in history education by including the perspectives of students, in addition to teachers. While this study focused mostly on how teachers experience and navigate politically sensitive topics, students

may have different but equally important viewpoints on these subjects. Researching how students experience these discussions could result in a more comprehensive understanding of the sensitive topics and classroom dynamics during these topics, and the effectiveness of specific teaching strategies.

Future research could also include younger or less experienced teachers. Beginning teachers may have different experiences from highly experienced teachers and may face additional challenges related to confidence or classroom management.

Another recommendation would be to broaden the geographical scope beyond Europe. While this study specifically focused on history teachers in Europe, controversial topics in history education are also shaped by circumstances outside of Europe. Comparative research involving countries from outside of Europe could provide valuable insights into how different educational systems and political as well as cultural climates influence the teaching of sensitive topics.

Conclusion

To conclude, this study examined how history teachers across various European countries handle politically sensitive and controversial topics in their classrooms. Through interviews with twelve experienced teachers from nine nations, the research identified which subjects are seen as controversial, how perceptions differ across countries, and what strategies teachers employ amid external pressures. The findings reveal that controversial issues are deeply rooted in both modern society and history education, mirroring broader trends of polarisation, identity formation, and political debate across Europe.

The results showed that, commonly, sensitive topics included national history, domestic politics, and recent international conflicts. Teachers frequently mentioned colonialism, fascism, communism, migration, LGBTQ+ rights, and conflicts in Gaza and Ukraine. The study also highlights the significant impact of the national context. Western European discussions often centred on colonialism and multiculturalism, while teachers in post-authoritarian countries emphasised the ongoing influence of fascist or communist legacies on collective memory and classroom dialogue. These findings demonstrate that controversial issues are inherently linked to each country's historical, political, and cultural landscape.

Moreover, teachers across Europe face similar challenges, including rising societal polarisation, misinformation on social media, and extremist narratives that influence students.

Participants reported that students expressed more polarised opinions and shared inaccurate historical facts, complicating respectful and constructive dialogue. Many teachers also noted the difficulty of remaining neutral while responding responsibly to discriminatory or extremist remarks in class. Some felt unprepared to handle emotionally charged or politically sensitive discussions.

Despite these challenges, teachers generally viewed controversial topics as both obstacles and valuable educational opportunities. Most emphasised creating safe environments where students can explore multiple perspectives, develop critical thinking, and practice respectful debate. Key strategies included using debate, multiperspectivity, contextualization, and evidence-based discussion. Most teachers did not shy away from difficult topics, believing that open dialogue fosters democratic citizenship and enhances understanding of history and current issues.

Ultimately, this study underscores the importance of history education in addressing the challenges of increasingly polarised societies. Classrooms remain vital spaces for students to critically analyse historical narratives, challenge misinformation, and explore diverse viewpoints. Improving professional training, institutional support, and media literacy education for teachers will be essential for fostering constructive and responsible discussions of controversial topics within European education systems.

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Appendix

Interview questions

General introduction:

First of all, thank you for being here. This interview is part of a wider research project carried out by a multidisciplinary group of students from the Radboud University. The goal of this research is to gain insight in how history teachers from Europe, deal with (politically) contested subjects – as a result, we want to develop a strategy for history teachers to tackle these (possible) problems. This research is conducted in collaboration with EuroClio, and the results of our findings will be published on their website.

Demographics:

Can you briefly introduce yourself? (Regarding, education, location, age etc.?)

- How many years have you been teaching?
- Where have you been teaching?
- Which student groups do you teach regarding, level of education, age?
- Around what age are the students that you teach?
- Does the group of students that you teach consist of many cultural backgrounds?
- At what level do you teach?

Does the government of your country decide whats in the curriculum or can you decide yourselves what history topics you want to teach?

Interview Questions:

How would you define your profession as a history teacher? (the importance of your position, what it means to be a history teacher

Which areas in the field of history education do you think have become more politically sensitive in your country in recent years?

Difference in/relation to current (e.g. abortion rights, LGBTQ) or historical topics (e.g. colonialism)?

Role of social media or any other (outside) forces?

Are these topics challenging to teach for you as well?

Do you perceive a rise of tensions among students in classes about these politically sensitive topics?

Do you feel personal restraint?

To what extent are the controversial issues included in the curriculum, and to what extent are they avoided?

How much freedom do teachers have to decide on strategies for dealing with contested issues? (combine this with another question as a follow-up)

Is there a (mandatory) role for you as the teacher to contextualise those topics? How do you treat these issues in class?

What would you define as the biggest challenges for current teachers in your profession, regarding to the contested subjects?

What do your colleagues think about this.

Or: is there a conversation between the teachers about this development?

Are there any strategies you use to calm those tensions?

Follow up: are there certain topics you avoid / are you elaborating on them less?

What are the possible solutions to these problems that you (may) encounter in the class?

How do you acquire the information to tackle those same problems (via colleagues, new educational insights, personal insights)?

Are there any school guidelines for teachers to deal with controversial issues?

What strategies have proven to be the most effective in teaching history in a politically sensitive way? (e.g., inquiry-based learning, debate, etc.)

Are new media and social media narratives influencing teacher strategies?

Are you encouraged to foster multiperspectivity and critical thinking when dealing with controversial history?

Last question of the interview: is there anything else you would like to share?

Conclusion: these are all the questions of the interview. Thank you for your time and effort – if there is nothing else you want to discuss; this will mean the end of our interview.

Coding categories

Question 1: 1 = Positive feeling towards the job 2 = negative feeling towards the job

Question 2: 1 = Human rights (LGBTQ, immigration, women rights, racism) 2 = Politics (form of leadership, current governmental issues) 3 = Wars 4 = National history 5 = Colonialism 6 = Totalitarianism (form of leadership) 7 = International development (Current worldwide issues, everything that's current)

Question 3: 1 = Yes, neutral feeling 2 = Yes, negative feeling 3 = A little 4= No

Question 4: 1 = Government includes 2 = school includes 3 = government excludes 4 = school excludes 5 = government includes/excludes some 6 = school includes/excludes some 7 = freedom for teachers

Question 5: 1 = Yes, positive feeling 2 = Yes, neutral 3 = Yes, negative feeling 4 = A little 5 = No

Question 6: 1 = Polarisation and rise of extremism (conspiracy theories e.g.) 2 = Information gathering (social media, Movies & Series, etc.) 3 = Lack of sufficient teacher training

Question 7: 1 = Disciplinary action (1-on-1 or with parents) 2 = Debate 3 = Creating safe environment 4 = They just do whatever

Question 8: 1 = Critical thinking 2 = Debate 3 = Logic reasoning 4 = Multiperspectivity 5 = Creating safe environment 6 = (Physical) Activities

Question 9: 1 = Yes 2 = No

Question 10: 1 = Yes 2 = No