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Two Steps Forwards, One Step Back

Sharing Our Stories and Looking for the Common Threads

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This article aims looking at some the changes in school history in Europe over the last fifteen years, to assess the question whether a common European syllabus/school textbook is possible, desirable and manageable, and if it could be realised might make the common ground for a shared programme of studies.

When I started to think of this article, I could not know how timely the chosen topic actually is, but less than two weeks after starting to write the European Union Education Ministers came together in Heidelberg, Germany. During that session the German Minister of Education, Annette Schavan, launched the idea of developing a common European school textbook. Thus this is an especially good moment for EUROCLIO to assess its attitude towards such a project.

In the early nineteen-nineties there was a massive drive among the political elites, scholars and practitioners in East and West to change practice in school history. The focus of the European Union's (restricted) educational policy after the Maastricht Treaty was to enhance the European dimension in history education, together with a need to encourage innovative history education in order to make it a meaningful subject for young people in the Twenty First Century.

After the Fall of the Wall, the wish for change in Central and Eastern Europe was in the first place focused on writing and rewriting (recent) history, especially national histories. The focus in Soviet education in the soviet republics and satellite states had been the denationalisation of the different peoples living in the Soviet Union, and school practice was aimed at the creation of a disciplined, politically aware and active citizen-internationalist. In reaction, the new born nations felt an immediate urge to redefine and write down their national pasts and to disseminate this narrative as widely as possible among its historians, history teachers, and students as well as among the general public. Although other post communist countries were spared the denationalization efforts of the Soviets, their national histories had also followed the Marxist historical approach and had therefore at least had to be freed from socialist /communist jargon and terminology.

Everywhere in central Europe this policy resulted in a substantial reform in history curricula. This process resulted in programmes of study with new content approaches and a strong emphasis on competencies, as was evident in the results of the 2003 EUROCLIO questionnaire. This inquiry, related to the Commemoration of 10 years EUROCLIO, gave an overview of the state of history education in Europe in that year, and visualised at the same time the process of change since 1989.

As answer to this need for reform, a variety of activities were set up. Intergovernmental organisations such as the UNESCO, OESO, OSCE and the European Union embarked on several actions in the field of (school) history; generally conceiving big events to bring together specialists on school history and therefore opening and intensifying international contacts

between specialists in the field. However these events were not followed up by any regular programmes or projects and therefore had little lasting results.

The Council of Europe, however, played a pivotal role in this international process of innovation of school history.

Since its foundation in 1949, the Council had always been actively aware of the (negative) impact that academic historical interpretation as well as school history could have on the process of greater unification in Europe. Therefore history and school history had received a central position in the Councils' education policy. Their work on the learning and teaching of history included consideration of content, as well as issues of methodology and pedagogy, involving a wide variety of international specialists. The Council organised numerous meetings, seminars and conferences for representatives of national governments, especially Ministries of Education, and published countless reports, all related to school history in Europe. This active policy was reinforced by the changed European circumstances of 1991, which enabled the Council to bring together professional representatives in school history from all over Europe in Bruges, Belgium. This memorable meeting became the starting point for a very intensive international cooperation on the learning and teaching of history, which lasted for more than a decade. One of the direct outcomes of the meeting in Bruges was the creation of EUROCLIO.

EUROCLIO was established in 1993 as the European Standing Conference of History Teachers' Associations, now the European Association of History Educators, with the aim of supporting a process of history education reform and innovation, to strengthen the European dimension in history education and to inspire colleagues to set up independent History Educators Associations. In 2008 we represent more than 60 organisations from over 40, mainly European countries. EUROCLIO's mission aims to support the development of an innovative and inclusive approach to History and Citizenship Education. It promotes collaborative values, critical awareness and mutual respect, peace, stability and democracy in society through history teaching and it wants to contribute to prevention and reconciliation of inter- and intra-state conflicts. It therefore focuses on improving the quality of history teaching and learning and the quality of the professionals involved, on enhancing history teachers' organizations and civil society and on national and international communication, networking and cooperation.

The member organisations subscribe to an approach to the learning and teaching where concepts such as mutual inclusiveness, interpretation, evidence and sources, multi-perspectivity, multiple narratives, complexity, objectivity, controversy, sensitivity and civic responsibility are basic elements for good history education. Members are also expected to teach about a range of human values, attitudes and dispositions. Teaching about the past means addressing positive issues like democracy, tolerance, respect for human rights, mutual understanding, solidarity, freedom, courage, equal opportunities, responsibility but also love and friendship. However it also means dealing with and reflecting upon negative concepts such as stereotyping, prejudice, bias, xenophobia, racism, violence and hate, which are part of this spectrum of human attitudes. EUROCLIO makes members aware of the subjective and normative language and narratives and promotes the use of impartial concepts whilst avoiding emotional adjectives and biased interpretations.

EUROCLIO supports a history teaching that addresses a balanced variety of political, cultural, economic and social issues and of geographical dimensions, offering school history from the

local to the global level. In order to make history relevant for young people history teaching should be closely linked to current knowledge, experiences, challenges and problems. Working with history is therefore an open process and pupils should be made aware that historical knowledge and interpretation are often provisional.

The organisation has also defined a general subject methodology where the technique, applied to historical themes has to be transparent and consistent. They include a clear historical question, critical use of empirical evidence, historical perspective of interpretation, keeping in mind the knowledge, mentalities and values of the respective period and a discussion about the relevance and impact for the present. A set of organising concepts are the basis for each study: change and continuity; similarity and difference; cause and consequence; time/chronology and fact and opinion. And finally, history teaching should focus on the development of curiosity and spirit of inquiry, ability to think independently and resistance to being manipulated. EUROCLIO adheres to a pedagogy that follows those approaches to learning that foster independent and creative learners.

With these basis elements in mind EUROCLIO has embarked on a wide variety of activities since 1993 with, because of funding constraints and sponsors interests, a strong focus on Central and Eastern Europe. This sponsor driven focus might easily lead to the conclusion that only in these regions of Europe, is history education a problematic matter. This is, of course, not true- and all of Europe has much to learn from each other! Scrutinizing school history in Europe on the basis of our EUROCLIO targets for a high-quality history education reveal a wide range of challenges in almost all European countries, and we are far an ideal school practice anywhere in Europe.

In order to acquire some understanding of the reality and variety of learning and teaching of history in Europe, EUROCLIO has, since 1997, organised an annual inquiry into the trends in history education in Europe. The topics of the study are always related to the theme of the large international training conference EUROCLIO organises each year. The inquiries of past years therefore looked into topics such as aims and objectives of school history; inclusion or exclusion of minorities in/from the history curriculum; the place and role of heritage education; holocaust education; human rights and history education; and the impact of the European expansion on the history curricula. Without claiming that the data follows thorough academic standards for such researches, we may say that the results of the questionnaires offer a good overview about the position of school history in Europe in the last decade.

From our inception in 1993 it has been clear to members that history education in Europe in general was neither supporting a common European awareness nor a common European identity. At that time history education in most of the larger European countries an unmistakable national centric approach was favoured in curriculum design. Even in coverage of topics such as the Potsdam Conference of 1945, as our international conference of 1995 demonstrated, the national focus always overwhelmingly dominated. This left many members feeling that history education needed to widen its perspective. Unfortunately it was almost impossible to convince most donors that history education in Europe needed content related common projects. Only in the case of the Balkans, clearly due to worrying events and understandable political agendas, were donors interested in multilateral projects. The European Union occasionally supported multilateral activities, however the focus was clearly on citizenship, human rights and democratic practice, and not directly linked to the hard core subject content.

Therefore, despite favouring an international outlook in teaching about the past, EUROCLIO has never been able to work on a common text or resource book on the history of Europe. It has, to be honest, also not really advocated such an approach, as many of its members feared a watered down official European narrative as result- and for many closer integration was not desirable. The only existing example in 1992, the European History Book published among others by Klett, and considered suitable for use in Secondary Education, confirmed for many these anxieties. However, most of our members do support a reflective approach to European school history, based on a charter of good practice, and would be happy to study some things in common to promote mutual understanding and multi-perspectivity. The Council of Europe's Recommendation on the Learning and Teaching of History, published in 2001, subscribed to by the full Council of Ministers and disseminated to all member states of the Council, was more to the liking of the members as a common European approach. In 2005, EUROCLIO based on the Council of Europe's document, formulated its own position on the issue.

However, the aim to strengthen the European dimension in the early nineteen-nineties did not bring the expected results. On the contrary, recurrent questions in the EUROCLIO questionnaires seem to indicate that since 2000 the focus on national history in Europe is increasing, and that governmental interest in enhancing a European dimension is subsequently decreasing. When EUROCLIO asked its Member Associations in 2003 which dimension has been increased since the late Eighties, national history came out as the area which had most increased. Perhaps this result could be attributed to the national interests of the new, and newly democratic, countries in central and Eastern Europe at that time?

In 2004 EUROCLIO members were asked to reflect on how far they were satisfied with the proportion of curriculum time given to different dimensions of history: the local, regional, national, European and world history elements in their curricula. Most satisfaction was expressed on the proportion of time given over to national history (average feeling content with coverage for all age-groups 68%), whereas coverage of local history received the lowest curriculum coverage (not content with coverage: average 51 %) and regional history (not enough coverage 52 %) – both resulting in a sense of dissatisfaction amongst respondents about the balance of teaching. The amount of European history covered received a yes, there is enough average of 55 % satisfaction and 32 % dissatisfaction.

In 2005 the results on the question 'Is more teaching about European history issues necessary?', show that there is a general demand for some increase, but not too much. However, on the other hand, promoting European and global citizenship through history education was generally acknowledged as desirable. In 2005 the inquiry also looked into the question what Europe means when European history educators teach about Europe. The answers show that in the first place this means teaching about Western Europe, with a good coverage ranging from 42% for ages 10-12, via 63% for ages 12-15 to more than 80% for age group 15-18/19. Second was coverage of the history of Central Europe (11%, 32% and 53% suggesting good coverage) and coverage of the history of Eastern Europe rated as 10, 28 and 48% good coverage.) However very little seems to be mentioned about Northern Europe in European history classrooms, with only 12%, 20% and 31% suggesting there is good coverage of the history of this area.

Of course it is questionable what good coverage actually means. Asking more detailed questions, for example about the coverage in history textbooks of countries like Latvia, shows

that specific coverage is limited. In the case of Latvia it only featured, or, perhaps better to say, was mentioned, in the aftermath of World War I, related to the Molotov-von Ribbentrop Pact and in connection with the end of Soviet Union and new independent states. The current European dimension differs only marginally from the curriculum choices before 1989: teaching about Central and Eastern Europe means still predominantly teaching about Russia and the Soviet Union. The same inquiry showed that a global dimension for school history in Europe is virtually absent, and is, except for a few attempts, also hardly discussed in Europe.

In the last years, 'Europe' has gradually lost its momentum, and is not such a sexy topic any more. In 2008 teaching national history features high on the agenda in many European countries. For many the process of globalisation finds an answer in yearning for an imagined safe national past. Politicians, historians and media all over Europe and beyond, repeatedly complain that the general public has a lack of national historical knowledge. In a growing group of countries politicians insist that the amount of national history in the curriculum should increase, or call to change the national narrative in school history in such way that their own 'victim status' heroic epochs, dominant ethnic communities and religious denominations are given prominent emphasis. It is interesting to notice how such national politicians acknowledge the need for developing an inclusive national identity as tool for internal cohesion, but at the same time how they deny school history a role in the creation of a sense of European belonging.

Just to give some recent examples. In Latvia the international curriculum for school history, in place since 1995, has changed into a curriculum separating national and world history, with the argument that Latvian history need to have more prominence in the learning and teaching of history. In Croatia veterans of the recent Yugoslav wars claim, with approval of certain politicians and media, that they should teach the history of these wars in school. But also in Western Europe, the importance of teaching national history is re-evaluated. In 2002 the Educational Authorities in England decided, despite a school history already traditionally focused on national history, that the focus on national history was not enough and that therefore that the study of English history should be obligatory at each level of history education up to and including students on the 'A-level', the pre-university examination. After the events of the 7th of July 2005, teaching Britishness through school history seems to have gained even more importance. In the Netherlands, a country with a long term international tradition in school history, an official Canon of Dutch Culture and History was published mid- October 2007, which should acquire a central position in the history lessons for pupils aged 9-14. In Denmark, another country which traditionally takes an international outlook, the new history curriculum gives evidence of the demand to introduce a bigger portion of national history. Searching the internet offers a further array of examples.

In the nineteen-nineties such nationalistic outcries would have been denounced, and would have been evaluated as sign of immature nation states. However in 2007, with school history under threat, it seems that unfortunately the best defenders of school history in Europe and beyond are the traditionalists in favour of strong emphasis on national history. Their arguments that 'the nation-state is the cultural glue that has traditionally held society together, and that social cohesion depends on creating and inculcating a common national culture in the schools, are used by many politicians, journalists but also by numerous nationalistic historians. This symbolises our failure, as historians and history educators, to convince present society with urgent and contemporary arguments about the relevance of school history.

The late, and too young deceased, Austrian history teacher trainer, Heinz Strozka once remarked that history education needs political sponsorship, and if history education did not fit the political priorities, it was doomed to be dismissed as meaningless subject. Therefore it was important that then European Union's presidency, Germany, showed renewed interest in the European dimension in school history and wanted to launch a common European history book for secondary school education. In my view, historians from across Europe should be involved to help establish a common European identity and strengthen understanding between Europe's various nationalities.

At their Heidelberg meeting the European Union Education Ministers discussed the plan for the first time, and welcomed it with some reservations. However, countries such as Poland and the Netherlands expressed major reservations about whether the project could be successfully implemented. The British nationalist Independence Party dismissed the idea right away, seeing the idea as 'an attempt by Eurocrats to brainwash the people of Europe'.

It is perhaps the moment to rethink EUROCLIO's attitude towards such experiments, as the direction we have followed for almost fifteen years did not achieve the impressive results we hoped for at our start. The present situation in history education shows that, despite the fact that we and our pupils and students live in a globalising society, since 1989 the basis for history curricula and textbooks have not changed very much. Instead of trying to come to terms with the needs of this globalising society for young people, we see a school history propagated that seeks to escape to an imagined secure national past.

However, going back to the nation state as nucleus for the history lesson is simply not longer an option; even the European dimension is already too narrow, certainly if this Europe is confined to the countries of the European Union. Historians and history educators must really strive to come forward with new, engaging narratives embracing at least a pan-European dimension- but even better a global perspective.

Since its foundation in 1993 EUROCLIO has continually worked in workshops, seminars, conferences and projects with a variety of European individuals and partners. The EUROCLIO model starts with setting up and reinforcing local networks of professionals, if necessary helping them to 'institutionalise' themselves into officially recognised Associations. The final stage of the model leads to the development, production and use of innovative textbooks as an alternative or extension to those already available alongside teacher resource books and training programmes. These experiences have developed models which might be used as possible frameworks for a European history school textbook.

However to embark on a project to develop common European materials about history, or a common educational website or even a common textbook will be a long road with many potholes and unpredictable turns, but what problems might we expect? In the first place we would be facing a European tradition in school history that operates with very different expectations and conventions. The first approach, more or less generally applied in North Western Europe, offers open history curricula, where textbook authors, schools and teachers are rather free to design their own programmes. Other countries, among them France and the Post-Communist countries, have very strict prescribed programmes of study, often with what to teach in each lesson described in detail. In fact in the last 10 years there have been stricter

curriculum structures in the first region and more open in the latter, however the differences are far from bridged.

The possibility of using such books/websites/ or materials, and from here I will use the word book, for convenience sake, in schools depends on national cultures. In the centralised countries the use of the official book in schools can be made mandatory throughout the land. However, in the decentralised countries, authorities allow each school or individual teachers to make choices about what kind of educational materials are used. Elsewhere many centralised states only allow textbooks in schools which are formally approved, often after procedures with little transparency.

Teaching the history of twenty-seven different European countries is impossible of course, and even more so teaching the history of the 192 countries which are member of the UN or the history of all the nations which inhabit this globe. Professionals in the nineties were interested in discussing ways to open up national history curricula, creating a European dimension without necessarily designing a compulsory catalogues of European topics. At that time it was a missed opportunity that EUROCLIO was not able to convince donors of the importance to explore this content matter on a Europe wide scale.

The Council of Europe did take some action, developing the project Teaching about European Twentieth Century History, and commissioning Dr Robert Stradling to publish a handbook about this topic. For this publication he used experience he had acquired in his work as senior consultant for history for the Council of Europe and the expertise of the networks of the Council of Europe and of EUROCLIO. Together they listed the traditional programme of study on the history of the Twentieth Century, as it is taught in many European countries and then compiled an alternative list.

In the new list of themes there is still space for all the traditional topics, however these topics are placed in a broader perspective. This list also shows how fast curriculum and textbook choices become dated and out-dated. In 2008 themes such as environmentalism and energy dependency, the rise in global communication and economic globalisation and the ascent of an awareness of Islam could probably be inserted.

In order to develop a meaningful publication, we should start with the basic question about the purpose of school history. To my opinion this means that history education in the first place helps pupils to understand the world they live in and provides them with necessary tools to cope with that world. If history educators also would like to consider a possible role for school history in creating social cohesion it is obvious that it will not always be able to show a common past to all students, however it can help pupils understand the common reality of the present and at it best to prepare them for a common/shared destiny.

However looking into European curricula for history education, there are other important aims to be addressed. The 2003 EUROCLIO inquiry listed the main aims for teaching history in Europe. Except for the already mentioned aim, supporting citizenship and democratic education, and enhancing critical learning skills are also mentioned in almost all European history curricula. In fact all the aims mentioned, except strengthening national identity and patriotism, are worth striving for and should be the underlying fabric for a common European school history textbook.

Traditional Themes 20th Century history	Innovative Themes 20 th Century history
Origins of the First World War	Technological and scientific developments
World War I	Social change in the lives of ordinary people
Russian Revolution	Changing roles of women in society
The re-structuring of Europe in 1918	The emergence of mass culture and youth culture
The rise of Totalitarianism: Communism, Nationalism Socialism and Fascism	The distinctive cultural and artistic movements
Economic Depression	Industrialisation and the emergence of post-industrial societies
The collapse of International Peace	Urbanisation
World War II: the People's War	Transport and communications
Re-structuring Europe in 1945	Population movements
The Cold War era: NATO and the Warsaw Pact	The changing situation of national and other minorities in Europe
De-colonisation	Conflict and cooperation
Post-1945 political and economic co-operation	Nationalist movements
The European Community	Totalitarianism and Liberal Democracy
Glasnost and Perestroika	Human Rights
The break-up of the Soviet Union	
The emerging independent democracies of central and eastern Europe	

Helping pupils to understand the world they live in, does not mean that I am advocating teaching only about modern history, but I do believe that the emphasis of the content selection, certainly for the age group of 15 years and older, should be focused on a rather recent past. I do not agree with the curriculum developers in countries like Greece, Italy or Portugal, who like to emphasis those periods in the national past, such as antiquity, renaissance and the age of discoveries, which place their cultures in a much better light than teaching about the more recent past. Since 1989 many post-Communist countries have also avoided teaching about the recent national past, and seek for topics in the national past which emphasised national glory and victimhood. I would therefore argue that a common European project should certainly start with a focus on themes related to a more recent, preferably 20th century, balanced past.

In this a Europe wide or even global perspective will replace the more or less strict chronological order with a thematic approach embedded in a chronological time frame. The suggestions for themes such as democracy and human rights, common European experiences, European cultural heritage and multicultural Europe by European history educators put forward in the

EUROCLIO questionnaires of 2004 and 2005 fit in the already mentioned alternative list of Stradling. Current curriculum debates regularly position chronological knowledge against the practice of selecting historical themes. However, what is considered as the traditional chronological survey of historical knowledge, is in fact nothing more than the traditionalist's selection of historical topics: a mono-perspective narrative with many important men, few women, no minority communities, much politics, a lack of ordinary people, some elite culture, not too much emphasis on colonial history and, in fact, an exclusion of most parts of the world.

Even the newly published experimental French/German school textbook *Histoire/Geschichte, Europa und die welt seit 1945*, which has been designed for common use in upper secondary education in both countries has not been able to avoid this traditional outlook on the past. Only two women feature in the biographies of important persons since 1945: Angela Merkel and Margaret Thatcher! The French authors were not able to come forward with one female compatriot outstanding enough to be especially mentioned in this part of the book. A common European book should certainly have to address a better representation of women in history. A change of spotlight in school history from hardcore political, economic and military history to a more multi-dimensional approach certainly will facilitate the inclusion of alternative narratives. This counts as much for the position and role of minority groups.

A global perspective does not mean throwing away the national perspective, but it means not using it as starting point. Talking about the highly fashionable topic of 'the enlightenment', we can begin with the concept; then address where, how and why it started; consider how it spread, where it did not reach; assess what it meant for certain societies, social strata and men and women; compare a national and international example; and finally consider what it meant for the local environment. Such a model can be applied from Romans, to slavery, to the women's emancipation movement.

EUROCLIO has fifteen years of working in 'history hotspots', developing curriculum materials and approaches to teaching, and this provides plenty of evidence that we share things in common- and that we sometimes interpret things very differently- both vital parts of education. Therefore EUROCLIO endorses the EU initiative to create a common European History, and suggests that this would be a welcome addition to telling traditional national stories.

Jelka Razpotnik, a recent President of EUROCLIO, commented that: "EUROCLIO has worked all over Europe on projects which encourage an understanding of multi-perspectivity. It is really important that young people get a History education that is broad and balanced and which shows how key events are connected and are interpreted". What counts is making it clear to the school students that there are different views, without there necessarily being one that is correct. Complexity is here the keyword for understanding the past.

At present EUROCLIO's project in the former-Yugoslav states of Serbia, Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina is empowering local history teachers to produce History textbooks for use by all the communities. The aim is help people look at the troubled past with an open mind and with a broader European focus. Such co-operation and development is wonderful to see in an area where extremism and conflict was so recent- and could still re-emerge if young people do not develop the key skills that History offers. If this is possible in Bosnia, then there is still hope for a history book for all of Europe.

In my experience a focus on European History from several viewpoints bridges differences between countries and peoples and strengthens stability and democracy in Europe. At the same time it helps people to become secure in their own sense of heritage and identity. However it is not a quick fix or a short term investment- and this is something that governments and donors can, and often do, forget.

We need to avoid turning a common European history textbook into a boring, sanitised version of history, a simple bland hymn of European cooperation. The narrative we should produce has to be open, inclusive and with a tone of critical self-reflection. If the European Union is serious about this project, it will require wide consultation- and the latest thinking about technique, structure and content- but it could be tremendously powerful and important. I would be delighted to see the idea progress.