



EUROPEAN POLICY BRIEF



REVISITING THE PAST, ANTICIPATING THE FUTURE:

STRENGTHENING EUROPEAN INTEGRATION THROUGH THE
ANALYSIS OF CONFLICT DISCOURSES

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Overcoming Troubled Past: Prospects for Future Research (1st Policy Brief)

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(with inputs from country team leaders¹)

1 INTRODUCTION

The European integration launched after World War II was conceived as a project for intertwining Europe politically, economically, socially and culturally to such an extent that the likelihood of another devastating military conflict and genocide on the continent would be reduced to a minimum. This ambitious goal of the “European founding fathers” was deemed to be successful only if people(s) living in these territories agreed upon a few basic principles underpinning the future relations among them. For example, one such principle was that the elimination of the use of armed force for achieving political goals, including those related to alleged “resolution of

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historical injustices,” was not an option or that finding an agreed-upon interpretation of the important historic events is a precondition for a durable peace.

Although the relations among the majority of European countries are better than they had been in the first half of the 20th century – especially considering the current relations between France and Germany or some other countries that have been on the opposing sides during World War II – troubled historical legacies and different, often diametrically opposed interpretation of past events still hinder further integration of Europe. Moreover, different interpretations of history *within* European countries influence social cohesion and negatively affect their internal stability. Especially in times of crisis, the original idea of an integrated Europe seems to be lost from sight.

Several **relevant policy problems** arise from the ongoing and constant resurfacing of troubled pasts. First, *formal education* in European states – the way history is being taught or history textbooks themselves, for example – primarily build on the national (or even state-endorsed) interpretations of the past, thus often neglecting the injustices that perhaps have been caused by one nation at the expense of others. This way, history quickly becomes a field which divides the people(s) and hinders European integration.

Second, *oral history* (personal memories and testimonies of people who had witnessed the period of a troubled past) disseminated within families or within other social groups oftentimes diverges from the official, often more detached narrative of history in question. In some cases, discussing contentious heritage resulting from wars, colonial violence, dictatorships, mass killings and other abuses of human rights – including those linked to the European communist or right-wing crimes – are not endorsed or not even allowed to be discussed in state institutions, or are portrayed simplistically, in a biased manner. Civil society organizations that aim to provide space for different understandings of the past are often ridiculed or even cut off from access to financial resources.

Third, troubled past often *spills over to (daily) politics*. As historic traumas have rarely been addressed efficiently, the past continues to haunt the present. This is often propagated by governing politicians, who find history and historical wrongdoings as an appropriate means for gaining political support by securitizing “the other” as an enemy.

Fourth, *the media* is another domain where troubled pasts resurface. The stories reported in the media – in contemporary times in particular marked with fake news and “the post-truth reality” – often fail to live up to the standards of professional journalism, which often seeks to provide a balanced perspective. This leaves people inadequately informed and inappropriately equipped to be able to make the best possible decisions about their lives and societies; many media outlets continue to operate as yet another tool used in political struggles, unscrupulously (ab)used by power centres. In such circumstances, one-sided, politically appropriate interpretations of the troubled past that fit into “accurate narratives” keep the consumers of such news in an information and opinion bubble.

Last, but not least, *art and culture* – despite the fact that they often strive for stimulating reflection, empathy and understanding of the Other – are another field of social interaction where the troubled pasts re-emerge. It can be observed that many works of arts and artistic practices counter

troubled pasts in a powerful way thus providing yet another site of conflict rather than its immediate resolution. Contemporary artists and cultural practitioners claim their right to work on troubled pasts and to intervene in collective memory both on national and transnational level.

In such circumstances, when unresolved troubled pasts seem to pervade all domains of social life, further integration of Europe and internal consolidation of European states are at risk. The EU has long been acknowledging that overcoming the troubled past(s), which presupposes relativizing the importance (meaning) of ethnicity as an element of societal and inter-state relations, as well as building a widely-shared notion of Europe as a continent based on certain values, could be a step toward greater stability. However, despite several attempts by the EU institutions to stimulate more cosmopolitan interpretations of nations and states (exchange visits; cultural events; writing of joint history textbooks; film production demonstrating the richness and importance of European identity etc.), it seems that many populist politicians throughout Europe have been, on a daily basis, “rediscovering” how framing people’s identities in narrowly-defined ethnic terms comes as a useful means for the consolidation of their electorate. This, of course, comes at the expense of attempts to reinforce a common European identity and oftentimes even acquires authoritarian dimensions.

Exploring how to overcome the issues related to troubled past(s) and how to reconnect the citizens of European states to the raison d'être of European integration lays at the core of the project RePAST – Revisiting the Past, Anticipating the Future (www.repast.eu).

2 EVIDENCE AND ANALYSIS

In this section, we elaborate on several policy-relevant findings stemming from our research.²

1. Dialogue and opinions on troubled past at the societal level are often less polarized than at the level of political elites

Our research (focus groups conducted with citizens and surveying in eight countries of the RePAST inquiry) has shown that *people not directly involved in politics – as members of political parties, for example – often do not have as strong opinions on the “correct interpretation” of history*, compared to those directly participating in daily politics. In other words, “ordinary people” often show more understanding to the suffering of people not belonging to their own social/ethnic group than certain politicians, who tend to instrumentalize the troubled past by offering black-and-white interpretations of the troubled history. However, the analysis of social media or comment sections of various web portals has shown that the debates among members of

² It has to be noted that policy briefs are not typical deliverables produced by H2020 research consortiums. As advised by the project officer overseeing the project RePAST Dr Rodrigo Martin Galan, policy briefs are primarily aimed at the experts in the DG Research and Innovation (DG RTD), who might rely on such documents during the preparation of future research calls. Thus, the reviewers are supposed to consider this fact, as the (scientific) methodology leading the preparation of policy briefs cannot be assessed the same way as the methodology underpinning other research deliverables.

different social groups often turn even more heated than the public debates among politicians. In some cases (Kosovo; Bosnia-Herzegovina) people with indirect experience of the conflict, for example young people, are less open and less likely to engage in the activities that could have led to reconciliation, compared to people who have personally experienced the conflict (e.g. the elderly generation).

2. Social and economic conditions often fuel the debate(s) on the troubled past and hinder the progress

In our research,³ we came across many examples demonstrating how dire social and economic situations, in which people find themselves, contribute to the radicalization and polarization of opinions on the troubled past. The latter is often correlated with: a) the ‘victimization narrative’ (e.g. fostering the belief that one’s own social group is in an underprivileged position exclusively as a consequence of negative actions committed by the other group towards “us”); b) lower trust in the European integration project as an eventual means for addressing social and economic injustices effectively. Difficult social and economic conditions also affect journalists, who were one of the focal points in our research; namely, it is the precariousness of journalists that also hinders investigative journalism (many journalists are afraid of losing their job if they investigate and report on sensitive matters).

3. A conundrum of interrelated problems as an obstacle preventing people from moving forward

Building upon the previous point, there are also other issues than economic, social, historic and political, which prevent people from overcoming issues related to the troubled past. Our research – and several other projects preceding RePAST⁴ – has shown that when people do not generally thrive in life, they often lag behind in many respects and are less prone to assess certain developments in society as positive and are, as such, less willing to be open toward different interpretations, worldviews and other issues that might challenge their beliefs. *A conundrum of interrelated problems – spanning from health issues, questions related to cultural identity, self-positioning, a lack of sense of life in general – that comes on top of economic and social challenges prevents people from moving forward and let go of problematic legacies.* In other words, sometimes the troubled past is not the crucial problem, although it superficially appears so. In several countries of our inquiry (Germany, Kosovo, Bosnia-Herzegovina), current social problems, which are often simplistically reduced to the difficult historic legacy of the respective countries, are related more to events in the post-transition period that deepened social cleavages rather than to the troubled past per se.

³ Findings acquired with interviews within WP2.2 (Oral History) in particular support this claim.

⁴ See, for example: Scheier, M. F., Carver, C. S. (2018): Dispositional Optimism and Physical Health: A Long Look Back, a Quick Look Forward. *The American Psychologist*, Vol. 73, Nr. 9.

4. Social sciences only are not sufficient to study the impact of troubled past

For many people, the troubled past causes life-threatening situations, which, according to insights from neuroscience, leave many people 'stuck in trauma'.⁵ Experiencing such adverse situations (death, loss, torture etc.) also ultimately rewires the brain.⁶ Our research (participants in interviews, focus groups) has confirmed that many people might be cognitively aware of the causal relationships between the historic events and that, in many cases, they understand that it was not only their own group that suffered during the troubled past. However, these *people often have difficulties understanding and acknowledging what kind of impacts the traumatic situations that happened in the past have on their body-mind – and how this prevents them from moving forward.* The research has shown that, making people aware of a possible neurological/neurobiological basis for their stereotypes, prejudice, fear, anger or other emotions and the effects of the troubled past, has the potential to help them view the deep-seated roots of their animosity towards “the other”. With regard to the text call that we have been addressing in the project, we believe that including these research approaches and methodologies could be a valuable addition to the research on troubled past, especially because we learned that also in the RePAST countries the transgenerational transmission of trauma is an issue.⁷ Last but not least, this does not mean that life science approaches should replace the current research strands deeply rooted in social sciences; on the contrary, they should only complement them, where appropriately, and so make future research more multidisciplinary.⁸

5. Limited options for the EU to effectively address troubled past(s) in European countries

The call we responded to is underpinned with an ambitious belief that the EU could play a significant role in addressing troubled past(s) in European countries. Based on surveying, focus groups and interviews, our research has shown that the EU is perceived as a relatively important player in many regards (an economic and political actor, a provider of relief and aid after natural disasters and wars; a symbol and a guarantor of certain norms, such as freedom of expression etc.). Despite the fact that the EU apparently holds a certain degree of symbolic capital, in many countries of the RePAST inquiry the majority of people believe that the EU *has not done much* to overcome the divisions related to troubled past(s). This is perhaps a consequence of the fact that the majority of people tend to believe that topics of the troubled past are a matter of an inherently and primarily “national character”, which should be dealt with by countries and

⁵ See, for example: Levine, Peter (2010): *In an Unspoken Voice*. North Atlantic Books, or Oxford Development Centre (2021), <https://www.oxforddevelopmentcentre.co.uk/getting-stuck-in-your-trauma-or-ptsd/>

⁶ See, for example: Shaw, B. (2019): When Trauma Gets Stuck in the Body: How Do We Heal?, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/intl/blog/in-the-body/201910/when-trauma-gets-stuck-in-the-body>

⁷ It should be noted that the distrust is also based on historic resentments (feeling of betrayal). In Poland, for example, many people believe that their country is not an equal partner in the EU. It is not difficult to spread this idea in the country, which has been left at the mercy of Nazi Germany during the World War II despite the promises of France and Great Britain to help defending it.

⁸ We also warn that relying on life sciences approaches only (e.g. studying the brain with neuroscientific techniques), without embedding research in the broader framework of social sciences, history etc. is dangerous, because it could lead to biological reductionism.

peoples themselves (in Greece, for example).⁹ However, people in some other countries (Ireland,¹⁰ Cyprus etc.) assign the EU a *credible potential* to address the countries' troubled pasts.

6. Limited interest of European policy-makers in research projects

The RePAST project had an ambition to include policy-makers and stakeholders in the research process since its very beginning in order to receive feedback and increase the likelihood that some of the proposals get implemented. Throughout the project, the majority of researchers had difficulties in attracting policy-makers on national levels (e.g. members of the national or local parliaments) or at the European level (e.g. members of the European Parliament) to the project. It has to be noted that policy-makers with academic background were, generally speaking, more cooperative in this regard than the rest. The researchers have had a relatively higher success with engaging stakeholders (e.g. representatives of non-governmental organizations or journalists). The global pandemic in 2020-2021 was not the only reason for a moderate success in these respects. Several researchers of the RePAST consortium, based on their experiences in prior research projects, argue that this finding does not pertain to this project only. On the contrary, the difficulties in engaging and including policy-makers in the research process has long been a norm transcending the field of politics and political science.¹¹

7. An abundance of information about the “Other” does not necessarily create conditions for better understanding among people

In this project, we learned that there is an assumption by policy-makers that better flow of information and improved knowledge production would *per se* create the conditions for the reduction of violence and conflict. The underlying presumption is that once people learn more about each other and the traumas of other people (information change), they better understand each other (attitude change) and thus they are less prone to inimical and even violent behaviour towards the other (behavioural change). However, there is no empirical evidence to support the simple and direct cause-and-effect relations suggested above. Rather, the effects might occur due to better communication, but their appearance and direction depend on a variety of complex factors. It is important that public access to information becomes a part of collective social, political and economic processes.¹²

⁹ Many participants in the studies share a belief that the EU is rather legitimized to intervene “softly” in the affairs stemming from the troubled history in order to appease or deescalate tensions or contribute to the alternative factual-based explanations that might challenge the official state narratives on certain historic events.

¹⁰ In Ireland, for example, there is a strong sense that the EU contributed significantly with regard to social justice and economic (community-focused) funding.

¹¹ Uzochukwu, B., Onwujekwe, O., Mbachu, C., Okwuosa, C., Etiaba, E., Nyström, M. E. and Gilson, L. (2016): The challenge of bridging the gap between researchers and policy-makers: experiences of a Health Policy Research Group in engaging policy-makers to support evidence informed policy making in Nigeria. *Global Health* 12 (67).

¹² In many countries of the RePAST inquiry, “the addressees” of people’s demands for truth and justice are (other) states (e.g. the United Kingdom in the case of Ireland, Serbia in the case of Kosovo and Bosnia-

8. Innovative tools for learning about the troubled pasts are well-received by students

During the project, two innovative learning tools have been developed by the RePAST consortium: eight Virtual Tours, in which people learn about the troubled past of a particular European city through a guided tour of a particular place, and a virtual game called “Fact Finders,” in which players discover how history is constructed and how historic sources differ in terms of credibility and objectivity. Testing the learning capacity of both tools at several schools in Cyprus, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Slovenia has yielded very positive results, *demonstrating that such learning tools are attractive for youth and beneficial in terms of acquiring knowledge and better understanding about the troubled past.*¹³

3 POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1: Support the conduct of regular empirical research on the issues related to troubled past

Explanation. A policy implication related to the often deliberate speech-acts of politicians instrumentalizing the troubled past is the intensification of people’s perception that a society is polarized even more than it actually is. Conducting regular empirical research (including public opinion polls, accompanied with qualitative research) would produce more impartial analyses based on the actual perceptions among the people. Such analyses could later be disseminated and explained to the public in the (non-partisan) media. They could also offer evidence that there are certain elements related to the troubled past that are less divisive than they appear at first glance and are shared by a majority of people (e.g. acknowledging that human rights abuses happened against all sides of a conflict, not against “our side” only).¹⁴ However, programmes for improving media literacy, promotion of dialogue and expanding the access to knowledge are a precondition of research endeavours yielding results.

Recommendation 2: Augmenting dominant social science research methods on troubled past with insights and approaches used in other disciplines, including life sciences, and shape future calls accordingly

Explanation. From the aspect of policy relevance, in order to develop more effective strategies for addressing the troubled past it is important to augment existing and often-used research methods with the knowledge and research approaches used in other disciplines, including life sciences (e.g. neurobiology, neuropsychology, neurophysiology). This way, research could produce a better

Herzegovina). In this instance, information needs to be released by (other) states as an inevitable component of transitional justice.

¹³ We have to note that at the moment of submitting this policy brief, this is a preliminary result only.

¹⁴ State violence – typical for the Northern Ireland, for example - should be also scrutinized in these endeavours.

understanding of how and why the people who had experienced the turbulent historic periods often cannot easily transcend trauma and leave the troubled past behind by being exposed to currently dominant, cognitively-inspired approaches for overcoming the troubled past (e.g. seminars, where people learn about historic events, the suffering of “the other” etc). We do not argue that the existing approaches should be replaced; on the contrary, social science research is the pillar, because it gives the context. However, a better understanding of how the human body functions when exposed to trauma would yield better programmes and ideas for overcoming troubled past due to the fact that overcoming trauma is not related to having access to high quality and credible information only.¹⁵ Also the programmes for reconciliation etc. should be revised in such a way so that they better integrate the recent knowledge on how trauma related to troubled past can physically (not psychologically only) prevent people from engaging in a more pro-social behaviour; analysing the efficiency of the existing programmes for reconciliation is also a research niche worth exploring.

Recommendation 3: Exploring the ways to study the troubled past(s) in an integrative fashion in the context of structural factors in a given society and the international arena

Explanation. The initial call, to which the project RePAST responded, failed to engage the significance of social and economic conditions in the discussions on the troubled past – in particular the impact of austerity and how that shapes identity and attitudes toward Europe (the emphasis in the call was on the political and historical aspects related to troubled past). These conditions, or structural factors, proved to be important, oftentimes even crucial in our research (we could also argue that it is impossible to study the impact of troubled past without considering the class factor). Exploring how attempts to overcome the troubled past are correlated with such structural factors (including apparently very ‘mundane’ things, such as access to medical and educational institutions, which is something not directly related to the troubled past) could better inform the development of new strategies for addressing troubled past.

Recommendation 4: Explore ways to better integrate policy-makers in the research on troubled past

Explanation. As mentioned in the previous section, the majority of policy-makers at national and European levels do not regard such research projects as something they should devote significant attention to. However, without policy-makers the majority of proposed changes stemming from such research projects cannot be implemented. Therefore, we propose to set up a framework that would invite greater commitment of policy-makers to be involved in such research projects.

¹⁵ Somatic (body-mind) research is a relatively new research strand that developed significantly in the last few years. Preliminary research data shows that when the programmes for reconciliation take into consideration these insights, results are quite optimistic (e.g. reduced anxiety and depression after participating in such a programme; this can eventually lead to the development of a greater empathy for “the other”). See, for example, Brom, D., Stokar, Y., Lawy, C., Nuriel-Porat, V, Karen Lerner, Z., Ross, G. (2017): Somatic Experiencing for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: A Randomized Controlled Outcome Study. *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 30(3).

Recommendation 5: Continue supporting the initiatives that attract youth to learn about the troubled past (e.g., interactive e-learning tools)

Explanation. Preliminary data acquired in early 2021 already hinted to the fact that students of high schools and universities, who participated in the testing of two e-learning tools developed in the course of the RePAST project (Virtual Tours; the interactive game “Fact Finders”), perceive such tools in a highly positive way. The preliminary data also shows that taking part in one of the virtual tours or playing the game increased knowledge of the troubled past in a particular country, as well as understanding of a few epistemological issues related to the past (e.g. that history is a socially constructed phenomenon). Thus, it is recommended that developing innovative solutions for addressing troubled past is endorsed in future calls.

Recommendation 6: Provide assistance for professional development of people who strive to overcome the legacy of troubled past (artists, journalists, media workers etc.) and explore how to make their efforts more efficient

Explanation. Professionals (e.g. journalists, media workers and artists) addressing the aftermath of the troubled pasts and traumatic memory should have a chance to develop their skills, networks of collaboration and find resources outside of often limited national funding opportunities. It is recommended that an overarching professional development framework is established for these professionals some of whom might be coming from conflict zones or politically oppressive systems themselves, where EU institutions – including those in charge of research and cultural activities, e.g. Research Executive Agency – should continuously seek out ways for their inclusion, support and development.

4 RESEARCH PARAMETERS (DESCRIPTION OF THE PROJECT)

The RePAST project investigates how European societies deal with their troubled pasts today through the analysis of conflict discourses rooted in those pasts, with a view on the impact of those discourses on the European integration. RePAST studies comparatively eight cases of countries whose troubled pasts sit squarely on legacies that still endanger the European integration: Cyprus, Germany, Poland, Greece, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Ireland, and Spain. In each of the eight countries, the conflict discourses rooted in troubled pasts are being studied in four fundamental spaces of civil society and sources of informal education: (a) history (oral and official), (b) the media (journalistic- and citizen-led media), (c) arts and culture, (d) politics (formal and informal politics).

The **specific objectives** of the project are:

- (1) to develop a *conceptual and methodological framework* for the multidisciplinary and cross-country comparative research of how collective memory of troubled pasts informs current conflicts, in relation to the European integration and the many faces of the crisis (economic crisis, refugee crisis, political crisis);

- (2) to *produce a typology of conflict discourses in four discursive fields* of paramount importance for collective memory and identity formation (history, the media, arts and culture, and politics) in eight countries, in a cross-country comparative fashion, taking into consideration how the current crisis in its multiple forms mediates these narratives;
- (3) to explore the *reception of the troubled-past conflicts* by members of the public and key civil society actors (e.g. citizens' associations, NGOs, activists, artists, political actors) and investigate the ways in which they reproduce, negotiate, (re)appropriate or subvert these discourses that appear in established media, through artistic representations and in political discourses;
- (4) to understand the *impact of conflict discourses* on political actors' and citizens' attitudes toward the European integration through eight national surveys (public opinion analyses);
- (5) to *equip policy-makers* in eight countries and at the EU level with *policy recommendations* for facilitating processes of cultural dialogue and mutual understanding of the past;
- (6) to *furnish civil society actors* (e.g. educators, artists, researchers, journalists, individual citizens, cultural institutions) *and the cultural tourism industry* in eight countries with four concrete tools and mechanisms for acting upon troubled pasts: a multi-modular online platform for deconstructing the conflict narratives, a series of digital mini-games for renegotiating the troubled pasts, a treasure-hunt game to discover the troubled pasts and workshops for cultural tourism professionals on how to deal with the troubled pasts;
- (7) to *disseminate the produced scientific knowledge, tools and strategies* to stakeholders and society at large at the national, EU and international levels.

To reach these objectives, RePAST adopts an innovative **multidisciplinary and mixed-method approach**, integrating quantitative and qualitative methods and drawing on concepts and techniques from sociology, history, communication/media studies, cultural studies, political science, computer science and law. Various research methods, data sources and techniques have been employed, including: analysis of primary and secondary data; interviews; focus groups; statistical analysis (for analysing surveys); news texts analysis (discourse analysis); data mining and computational analysis.

5 PROJECT IDENTITY

PROJECT NAME	Revisiting the Past, Anticipating the Future: Strengthening European Integration through the Analysis of Conflict Discourses (RePAST)
COORDINATOR	Dr Dimitra L. Milioni, Cyprus University of Technology, Limassol, Cyprus, Dimitra.Milioni@cut.ac.cy
CONSORTIUM	Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, AuTH Thessaloniki, Greece Clio Muse IKE – CLIO Athens, Greece Cyprus University of Technology – CUT Limassol, Cyprus Lancaster University – LAC Lancaster, United Kingdom Ludwig Maximilian Universität München – LMU Munich, Germany Serious Games Interactive Ltd. – SGI København, Denmark Universidad Autonoma de Madrid – UAM Madrid, Spain University College Dublin – IE Dublin, Ireland University of Agder – UA Kristiansand, Norway University of Ljubljana – UL Ljubljana, Slovenia Vesalius College – VeCo Brussels, Belgium Widok Foundation for Visual Culture – Widok Warszaw, Poland
FUNDING SCHEME	Horizon 2020 Framework Programme for Research and Innovation (2014-2020); Societal Challenge 6 – Europe in a changing world: inclusive, innovative and reflective societies; call H2020-SC6-CULT-COOP-2016-2017, topic “Understanding Europe – Promoting the European Public and Cultural Space”
DURATION	May 2018 – October 2021 (42 months)
BUDGET	EU contribution: 2 497 359,66 €
WEBSITE	www.repast.eu
FOR MORE INFORMATION	Contact Dimitra L. Milioni (Dimitra.Milioni@cut.ac.cy)

FURTHER READING

Antoniou, G., Dinas, E., Kosmidis, S. 2020. Collective Victimhood and Social Prejudice: A Post-Holocaust Theory of Anti-Semitism. *Political Psychology* 41(5): 861-886. <https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12654>

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