

**EUROCLIO 27th Annual Conference**

Belgrade Serbia 31 March – 04 April 2020

**CONTROVERSY  
and  
DISAGREEMENT  
in the classroom**



## Concept Note

## *Conference aims and objectives*

1. To compare and contrast the experiences of Serbia as well as other countries in the region and across Europe and beyond on teaching controversial and sensitive history.
2. To disseminate and explore history teaching materials that help students acquire those social and civic competences that enable them to interact with people that they (fundamentally) disagree with, in a constructive manner.
3. To become aware of some of the main challenges of teaching controversy and disagreement in the classroom, and teaching strategies that can help overcome these challenges.
4. To strengthen capacities of participants in the assessment of social and civic competences.
5. To disseminate and explore implementation of innovative history teaching resources and guidelines produced by national, international, NGO's and intergovernmental organizations.

## *Controversy and Disagreement in the Classroom*

In our world today, social media and information found on the internet increasingly influences young people's views. They are confronted with a constant flow of information and can access global news and views 24/7. The information they see is based on what their friends, family and people they follow engage with. This bias can result in strongly held beliefs. This is especially problematic when this concerns extremist ideologies, conspiracy theories, alternative facts and so-called 'fake news'. As a consequence, teachers are now more often confronted with radical views and expected to deal with them. The formal education system can be a place to discuss, and challenge these ideas and better where information is coming from and how it is selected. By discussing in pairs, in small groups, or as a whole class, students can deepen their investigations by exploring different aspects of an issue, or exchanging information on different points of view.

At the same time teachers may feel discouraged to tackle controversial issues because they do not feel expert enough on the topic to deal with it. Or they could have concerns that difficult topics will take up too much of the teaching time, jeopardizing the necessary time for the regular curriculum. Teachers are under increased scrutiny these days, as is demonstrated by increasing incidents of students posting video material of their teachers, breaking the safe space that is needed to have difficult conversations.

## *Why does it matter?*

In a time of growing division, where intolerance creates an "us-versus-them" attitude among social groups, it is essential for students to learn how to deal with controversial subjects, and how to cope with a variety of viewpoints and disagreements. And therefore it is also important that teachers include methods of dialogue, debate and discussion in their lessons, and deal with controversies.

- Healthy democratic societies are those in which people know how to argue without resorting to harm and violence. Through dialogue, debate and discussion young people can learn to **develop listening and speaking skills** to argue well. This helps them to become active and responsible democratic citizens.
- Many countries are experiencing a growing **diversity** in their classrooms, as societies are growing more diverse. Students should learn how to deal with this diversity of people and plurality of ideas and viewpoints in the world around them.
- History is always contested, with discussion and debate at its heart. Young people can learn to **challenge, explore and test the evidence-base of claims** so that they are able to distinguish valid historical interpretations from historical perspectives.

- Using dialogue, debate and discussion **gives students voice**. They learn that there are many evidence-based opinions and have the opportunity to participate.
- Schools are a great place to try these methods out, as they should be safe learning environments in which young people can test out ideas and **explore new thinking, change their views and critically evaluate their own values and attitudes** without fear of judgment. At the same time it offers an opportunity to teach them how to **respectfully disagree**.
- Dealing with controversial issues provides a good way to directly **connect with students' lives** and with the outside world (outside the safe school environment). Ignoring them would mean ignoring the realities in many students' lives.

### *Why Serbia / Belgrade*

It has been 20 years since the end of the last conflict in the Balkan region. During this period many actions were undertaken to implement education for democracy and competences for democratic culture within the educational systems. At the same time, national stereotypes are still very strong in the post conflict societies in the Balkan, including Serbia. They impose distorted notions about other (ethnic) groups and slow down the processes of dealing with the past and its controversies.

In divided societies the historical narratives of contesting groups are closely connected with group identities and a sense of victimization. The different narratives from the groups are often contradictory and controversial. Even though specific legislative provisions have been implemented, stereotypes find their way through traditional and social media and are received as acceptable cultural models by many. In this way they help to solidify the overstressed positive image that people have of their own group and the negative perception they have of "the others", thereby directly helping raise tensions in society, both in Serbia and the region.

Some challenges specific include Yugo-nostalgia and the tendency for the admiration of totalitarian ideologies in general, lack of respect and acceptance of diversity among the peers, a simplified view on identity and insufficient support of the educational system in overcoming intolerance issues. In such a context dealing with controversial issues and dialogical methods can be even more challenging for teachers. At the same time it is critically important, to reinforce democratic and peaceful tendencies.

In this setting it is interesting to further explore the concepts of controversy and disagreement in the classroom.

### *The logo of this year's Annual Conference*

The logo of the Annual Conference shows a photo of the building of the national TV station, which collapsed during the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999. This building and the military action connected to it trigger several controversies. Furthermore, it connects to a highly contested part of the recent history, still sensitive and controversial. The controversy emerges from the act of the bombing itself, as a military campaign not approved by the UN Security Council. The target was situated in the heart of a park in the city center; the selected target was a civil, not military object. The main broadcasting during the war was carried out from an alternative position outside the city, so the bombing of that particular building didn't have any substantial effect on transmission, but had large psychological effect. The people who died in the building were journalists, TV technicians and civil security working at TV station, and the responsibility for their death is put not only on NATO, but also on Milosevic's regime for not evacuating the building timely.

Today, the building is more or less in the same state as on the enclosed photo, and can be easily seen while touring the city.

## *What will you learn?*

In this conference and international training course you will learn more about controversy and disagreements in the classroom. You will be challenged to think about what controversial topics are, how to disagree respectfully in a classroom environment, and what role you as an educator want to play in terms of positioning yourself. Through lectures, panels, workshops, interactive sessions and on-site learning you will get more insights in the topic in general and specifically in the Serbian context. You will be trained in ready-to-use strategies, methods and materials you can apply in your own teaching and learn more on how you can assess the social and civic skills of your students in that process.

The topic will be explored through a series of *themes*:

- People on the Move
- Borders, Annexation and Secession
- Surviving under Pressure
- Cultural Heritage

### People on the Move

Europe has a rich history of population movement. With the implementation of the Schengen Agreement in the 1990s, a large share of the borders in Europe has faded. With the refugee crisis of 2014 the discussion sparked back up about reinstalling stronger border controls, some argued even within the Schengen area. *People on the Move* is a topic that sparks a lot of debate with a wide variety of opinions on how to respond to the influx of people in a country or community. At the same time it offers a great opportunity to use historical examples to get a better understanding of why people move, and why they have certain opinions, and to find continuity and change in the relation towards migrants. Questions here focus on why some countries are taking in refugees and others are not, and what some of the challenges are that host countries are facing.

### Borders, Annexation and Secession

This theme looks into the question: who decides which boundaries are legitimate? This brings up questions related to democracy and power, self-determination and minorities. The theme offers great opportunities to look into the often long historical roots of different cases to better understand claims made related to (desired) border changes. There is an opportunity to explore why people have wanted to be independent, or part of a different nation, and the role of political systems of the countries involved. It also helps to explore the rightfulness of self-determination, and the benefits and drawbacks of changing borders.

### Surviving under Pressure

Can a historian make a judgment about the choices people make while living under pressure? People have been forced to survive in situations of pressure in many instances, being occupation by Nazi Germany during World War 2, or outside invasion by foreign powers, or living under totalitarian regimes. The attitudes and behaviour that people demonstrate in these situations is not always easy to label as 'good' or 'bad'. It is very often a mixture of sometimes-contradictory moves that can be explored when looking at the impact of specific contexts on choices that people make.

### Cultural Heritage

Cultural Heritage is a topic of public debate for different reasons: from references to discriminatory practices in the past with the 'Black Piet' tradition in the Netherlands, to the protest against the appraisal of colonial heroes in 'Rhodes must Fall' movement in the UK and South Africa. In this theme we will explore some of the challenges of controversial cultural heritage, specifically looking at street names, monuments and buildings. Who deserves to be remembered? And how do changing societal morals and values, and politicians, play a role in this? These are some of the questions that are explored within this theme. Moreover there is a great potential to explore your own local history through this lens of cultural heritage.