

A RESILIENT PROMISE: TEACHING THE FRAGILITY OF DEMOCRACY

Online | 13 September - 22 October 2021



EuroClio
Inspiring History and Citizenship Educators

A EuroClio Webinar Series

CONCEPT NOTE



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EuroClio – European Association of History Educators is delighted and honoured to present “A Resilient Promise: Teaching the Fragility of Democracy”. The webinar series will take place online from 13 September to 22 October 2021¹.

EuroClio, the European Association of History Educators, is an international Non-governmental organisation that promotes the development of responsible and innovative history, citizenship, and heritage education by promoting critical thinking, multiperspectivity, mutual respect, and inclusion.

Together, we will welcome between 30 and 50 motivated history and citizenship educators from all across Europe for a series of five live sessions. During these sessions, participants will be able to engage in interesting discussions, join active workshops, and enjoy networking opportunities.

By tackling the questions “how to deal with the challenges of democracy?” and “Why, regardless of these challenges, is democracy worth fighting for?”, this webinar series will reflect not only on how to help our students learn about democracy, but also how they can contribute to making it more stable and safe.

This concept notes serves as a guide to the webinar series themes and aims.

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¹ Dates to be confirmed

Why a webinar series on the fragility of democracy?

Throughout the 20th century, people across Western Europe seemed to believe that there was no better alternative system of governance than democracy. This sentiment only grew when the nemesis of the Western liberal democracy, the communist USSR, fell in 1989. By then, it was widely recognised that only democracy would allow states to deal with the contemporary challenges of the plural, complex, modern day societies². Political scientists assumed that slowly but steadily the whole world would move to this system of governance, as all states would rid themselves of the other oppressive forms of governance.

However, in October 2020, the Cambridge Centre for the Future of Democracy stated that democracy was in “a global state of malaise” – as most of the world no longer trusted this widespread form of governance. They substantiated this claim with statistical research based on survey data of 4 million respondents, collected over a period of 50 years³.

Especially in the last decade the positive attitudes towards democracy have diminished. People are increasingly disappointed with the way in which democracy has been implemented by states, as core democratic values have been put under pressure by a variety of state and non-state actors⁴. “The economic uncertainties generated by market liberalism, the difficulties encountered by the European Union since its eastward expansion, and the perceived retreat of liberal values provoked by authoritarian nationalisms, new forms of identity politics, and the more multicultural composition of society”⁵ and the democratic intolerance, and issues with representation, media freedom, where all identified as issues that erode democracies around the world⁶. What the last few decades have shown is that democracy is fragile everywhere – we can no longer say it is an issue only native for peripheral democracies.

The report of the Centre for the Future of Democracy⁷ showed that especially people under the age of 35 increasingly no longer have faith in democracy. This is because many of them were born in democratic systems and have not experienced dictatorships or conflicts first hand. Therefore, it is important to deal with the age gap between teachers and students and how this might affect views and valuing democracy. In addition to this, in 2013 Cammearts et al. have published articles on how

² Conway, M., 2019. On fragile democracy: Contemporary and historical perspectives—Introduction. *Journal of Modern European History*, 17(4), pp.422-431.

³ Foa, R.S., Klassen, A., Slade, M., Rand, A. and Collins, R., 2020. The global satisfaction with democracy report 2020. Bennett Institute for Public Policy, University of Cambridge.

⁴ Conway, M., 2019. On fragile democracy: Contemporary and historical perspectives—Introduction. *Journal of Modern European History*, 17(4), pp.422-431;

Issacharoff, S., 2006. Fragile democracies. *Harv. L. Rev.*, 120, p.1405.

⁵ Conway, 2019. p. 3

⁶ European Commission, Communication from The Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the European democracy action plan COM/2020/790 final

⁷ Foa, R.S., Klassen, A., Slade, M., Rand, A. and Collins, R., 2020. The global satisfaction with democracy report 2020. Bennett Institute for Public Policy, University of Cambridge.

teenagers in particular are not participating (enough) in democratic practices.⁸ This is often ascribed to general apathy towards politics. In particular, the authors carried out an extensive study of political engagement of teenagers across Europe and identified that young people do not participate in democratic practices, because they have little faith in how these processes are being executed. In the last decade, things have started to change, and the European Parliament Elections of 2019 saw an increase in democratic participation, especially of youth. However, there is still room for improvement. To pursue this improvement, the European Union recently issued the “Democratic Action Plan 2020-2024”⁹: a plan to solidify and counter the deteriorating state of democracy across Europe. There, they stated that teachers and schools play a pivotal role in encouraging youth participation in democratic practices.

In order to support the Action Plan, education about engagement is crucial. By taking a step back to examine how democracy is being taught to youth, and how the process of encouragement could be supported better, students will be provided with tools to take part in their communities as active citizens. Democracy should not be only looked at from a historical point of view, but as something that students are part of in the present time.

In this, democratic state of malaise, teachers are thus expected to teach their students about the functioning of democracy and their duties as future citizens. A daunting task, to say the least. To help teachers across Europe deal with these challenges, EuroClio devised a webinar series that gives teachers hands on tips, tricks and information in dealing with such a difficult subject.

Key Questions

1. How to discuss the value of democracy?

The value given to democracy is largely determined by context: national, local, and personal circumstances influence how each individual sees not only democracy, but their role in society. For example, today educators often find it difficult to teach the value of democracy to students who were born in thriving democratic and pluralistic states, without experiencing dictatorships or conflicts first hand. Therefore, it is key to know how to deal with the age (and experience) difference between teachers and students and how this might affect the vision of democracy that students have.

2. How to promote engagement in a supportive way?

Youth participation and involvement in democratic activities is scarce. For this reason, it is important for educators to show students how they can exercise their political and social rights; such as the right to vote, right to associate, as well as their own participation, to become agents of

⁸ Cammaerts, B., M. Bruther, S., Banaji, S., Harrison. *The Myth of Youth Apathy: Young Europeans' Critical Attitudes Toward Democratic Life*. American Behavioral Scientist 58 vol. 5 (2014): 645-664.

⁹ European Commission, Communication from The Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the European democracy action plan COM/2020/790 final

change, designing and guiding public policies. For this, the first step is that they know what paths exist and discover their interests.

3. How to deal with extreme viewpoints?

Extreme viewpoints are strengthened by emotions and personal experiences. Debating and engaging in conversation is desirable, but it can lead to aggressive behaviour. To tackle this, teachers must be equipped with tools to establish debate in a way that different views are still respected. Furthermore, where is the line between sitting in discomfort and violating freedom of expression?

4. How to teach about democracy as something that continues to evolve in the future?

As society develops, so does democracy. When educating youth about democracy and democratic practices, it is crucial to consider what we want current and future generations to learn about it, and what tools we want to provide them with. Schools are the main place in which young people form their views about democracy, which consequently affects how they think and act in the future.

The design of the Webinar

The series will consist of five sessions. It will kick off with a keynote on the allure of authoritarianism, which will help us set the tone for future sessions by putting us in touch with first-hand experience of individuals who were part of extremist groups in their youth, what appealed to them, and how did they decide to leave this path and promote democracy and understanding. The keynote lecture will be followed by three active workshops. Each workshop will give participants practical advice and access to tools to promote:

- Students' engagement
- An understanding of what is freedom of expression, how it is exercised in a sensitive manner, and what does it mean to sit in discomfort
- An understanding of the history of democracy

The webinar series will close with an interactive session where participants will have the opportunity to share the obstacles they encounter when talking about democracy in their classroom, and to discuss approaches on how to overcome these obstacles.

Aims of the training

During the webinar series, we will:

- Discuss how different generations may view democracy;
- Discuss the role that expressing extreme viewpoints has in the classroom;
- Discuss best practices for teachers as agents of change;
- Investigate the different democratic activities that are available for young people;
- Be introduced to tips and tricks to lead debates involving contrasting points of view;
- Discuss your experiences regarding the challenges that non-democratic systems pose for the future.

Expected Outcomes

This series will result in:

- Increased understanding of the role that personal biases play in democracy education;
- Increased knowledge of the connections between uncomfortable arguments and freedom of expression;
- Increased understanding of how to promote and value living in a democratic system regardless the age gap and its flaws;
- Recognition of the role that schools play in shaping the views that young people have on democracy;
- Recognition of developed competences in history education through lifelong learning in the international context;
- Improved (English) language competence through facilitated and engaged dialogues;
- Dissemination of educational materials and resources provided by the designated speakers.

References

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