

# Citizenship Education Facing Nationalism and Populism in Europe

**Strategies - Competencies – Practices**

## Conference Paper

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***Let's talk about ghosts or how can national and European history be reconciled.  
Examples from Poland.***

1. For many Poles our national history has always been a source of pride, self-esteem and identity. We have generally considered ourselves and portrayed Poland as the victim of its more powerful, greedy and immoral neighbors. Poles have had to sacrifice their lives in a never-ending struggle for freedom. At the end of the 18th century Poland was partitioned by Prussia, Russia and the Austro-Hungarian Empire and vanished from the maps of Europe for more than 120 years. A mere twenty years after finally regaining independence in 1918 the country was invaded by Hitler's troops. After five years of Nazi occupation and as a result of the Yalta Treaty Poland found itself as part of the Soviet camp. Millions of victims, millions of devastated biographies. It seems quite justified to feel injured and full of resentment towards the oppressors. This also makes it difficult to accept responsibility for our own misdeeds towards other nations and national or ethnic minorities. Only in 1989 did we really become a free nation. Thus our history looks like a very tough case for reconciliation. And yet - in my personal opinion - we are witnessing such a process. It is slow but visible. What forces facilitate this process and what can set it back?

2. Poland and other smaller nations have barely been present in the European historical narrative of the 19th and 20th century. Norman Davies, a British historian and expert in European and Polish history, states that European history was limited by the Vistula river on the East. We all need a new European historical framework that includes nations from its peripheries. A Pan-European historical "Vademecum" developed by experts from all the countries could help to fill this vacuum. It should incorporate the history of wars, conflicts and homicide but at the same time it should give us an idea of everyday life and depict a clear distinction between the regimes and the populace. Such a change in the European historic narrative is necessary, and to some extent it is taking place already now.

3. Education can have a deep and positive influence: we do not have to stop celebrating national history, but at the same time we must look for a common European (and human) perspective: common roots and unifying experiences. Here are some examples of the educational projects implemented by the Center for Citizenship Education in Polish schools in cooperation with schools from other countries:

- *Traces of the Past*: with German, Czech and Lithuanian partners,

- *Let's Talk about Freedom*: Anne Frank Zentrum; Erinnerung, Verantwortung und Zukunft
- *Common Past and Common Future: different nations and cultures in Polish history and identity*
- *Righteous among Nations, Righteous among us*: with Children of the Holocaust
- *Good People in the Times of Evil*: with The Jewish Foundation for the Righteous, American Embassy and Center for In-service Teacher Training

#### 4. Other examples of “good practices”:

- Borderland (Pogranicze) Foundation
- Foundation for Preservation of the Jewish Heritage
- Borussia Foundation
- Krzyżowa Foundation for Mutual Understanding
- Museum of the Second World War in Gdansk

5. We are now – and not only in Poland - undergoing a deep generational change that can strengthen a historical reconciliation. We and our parents grew up under the strong influence of national stereotypes and historical clichés, fed by propaganda, fear and very limited relations with other European nations. Younger people’s visions of Poland are no longer haunted by “historical ghosts” - of Germans who occupied Poland, of communist Soviet invaders, Ukrainian bands of murderers or Jews who wanted to take over our Polish properties... Young Poles do not have to “attack” or “defend” when confronted with other young Europeans - they can afford a more balanced view of history. This change of attitude is facilitated by face-to-face contacts with Germans, Russians, Ukrainians, Jews and others, as well as by travels, student exchanges, migration, direct access to diverse national and regional cultures and last, but not least by the broad global web of young internet users (e.g., Facebook, Myspace). Meeting real people in the real or even virtual world helps historical reconciliation as positive human experiences becomes more important than parents’ and grandparents’ memories and traumas.

In the meantime all Poles – not only the younger ones – have changed their attitudes towards other nations: this is visible in particular in relation to Germans and Ukrainians. We are still high on the scale of prejudice against Jews (though some other nations are higher...) , but our consciousness has nevertheless been changed by very deep and dramatic debates about Polish anti-semitism during and after the Holocaust.

6. Who and/or what can confound this historical reconciliation process? First and foremost – a primitive political discourse, one that appeals to nationalist resentments and populist rhetoric. The “Poles as a nation in danger” rhetoric is always more animate during elections, but it is – at least to some extent - present all the time as a hidden agenda of some parties, political circles and media. Education, however, and citizenship education, in particular, can help detect and neutralize such messages. Wrongful political decisions regarding the cooperation between nations/governments in revealing historical facts (and their culprits) can also be very harmful – such as the reluctance of Russian governments and courts to acknowledge Stalin’s crime in Katyn in 1940. Such a crime has to be acknowledged before it can be forgiven. But even in this case we have finally seen a positive sign from Moscow: a very high Russian official from the so called “Polish-Russian Commission on Difficult Matters” (symptomatic even in its name) said some days ago that “all the circumstances of this Stalinist crime have to be cleared up.”

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