

RECONCILING EXPERIENCES OF THE PAST

HEALING THE EAST/WEST MEMORY DIVIDE IN EUROPE

WHAT IS THE MEMORY DIVIDE ?

Liberation Vs. Second Occupation Narrative:

Where the Western powers viewed the end of World War II as an ultimate victory, to the states left on the other side of the Iron Curtain, it was merely the beginning of a second, and even longer occupation. This period is marked by mass deportations, infringements on democracy, and millions of deaths.

East being abandoned by the West:

This period of occupation in the East is perceived to be a result of the other Western allies turning their backs on the other states. The concessions and agreements made at the Yalta Conference of 1945 is perceived as one of the primary indicators of this.

Contrasting Heroes, Villains, and Hierarchies:

Because of these dichotomous narratives, different individuals and events in history are perceived in contradictory ways, as well as how certain tragedies are remembered in relation to others.

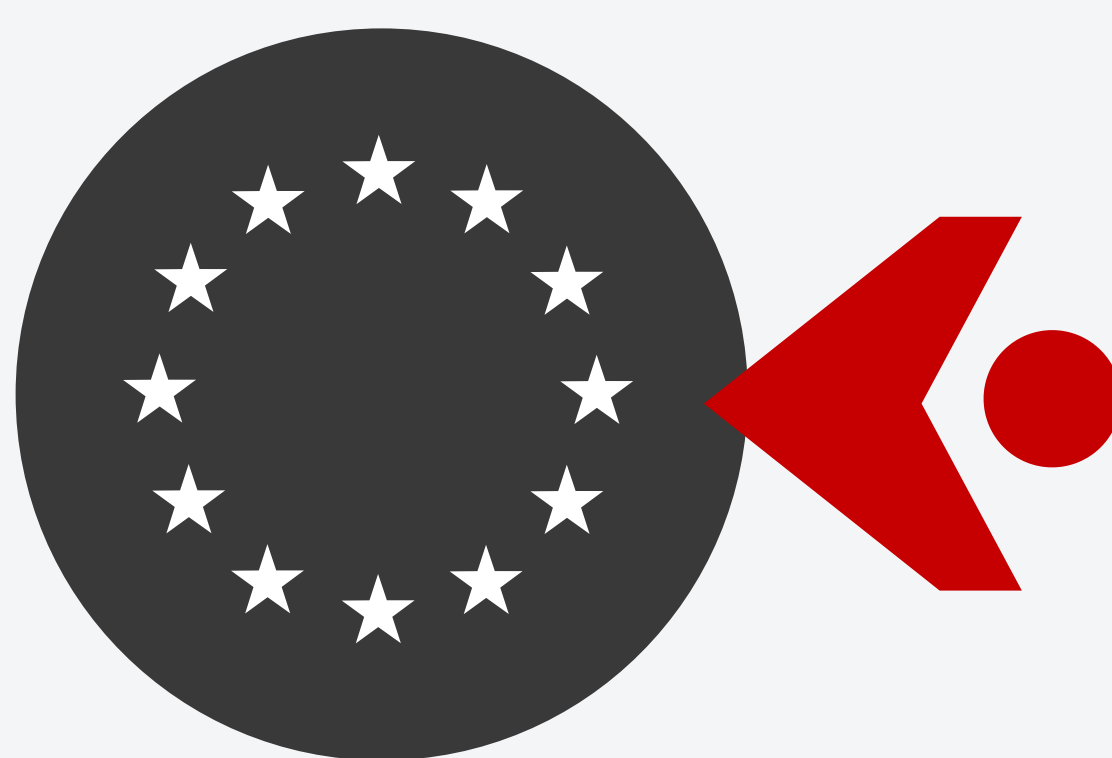
“Memory of the Conflict in Western Europe primarily centers on the Holocaust...while it largely portrays the Soviet Union as an Ally. These fundamental differences have led to discursive clashes between Western and Eastern Memory narratives.”
(Siddi & Cawaeda 2019)

HOW DOES THIS DIVIDE IMPACT THE EUROPEAN UNION?



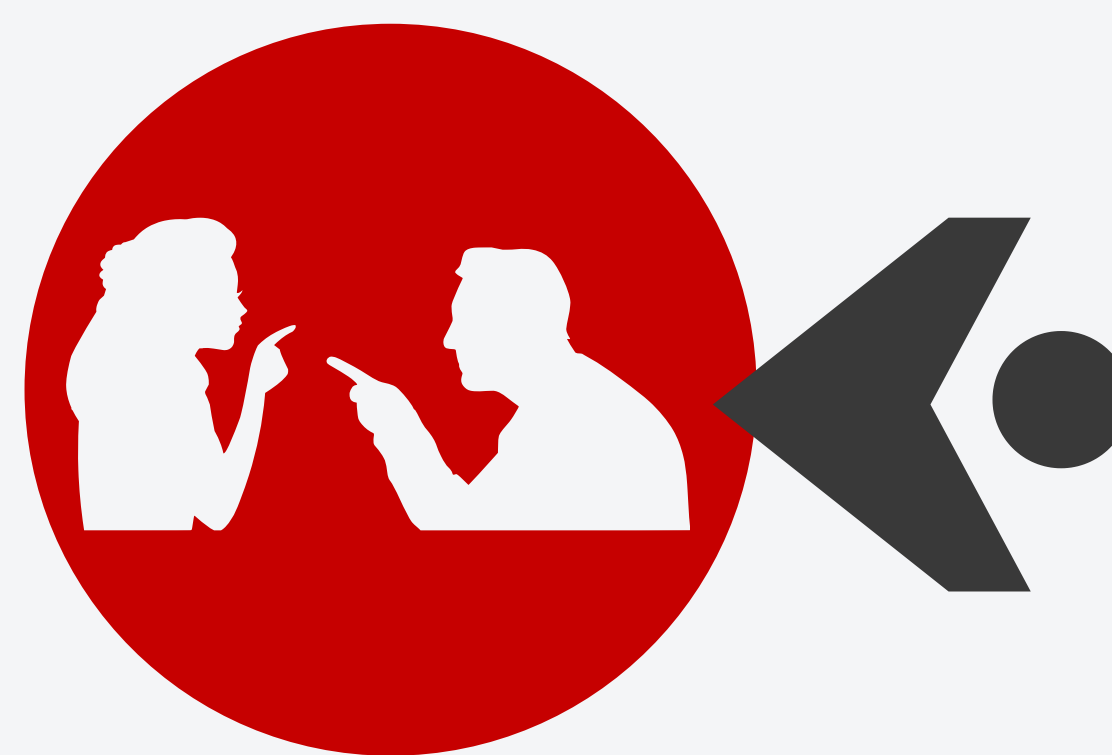
COOPERATIVE FAILURES

Rooted in a lack of cohesive understanding, Eastern and Central European perspectives are often dismissed, leading to failures in perceiving and addressing security threats and building trust throughout Europe. The most recent example could be seen in the West's dismissal of early warnings regarding the Russian invasion of Ukraine.



IMBALANCED CENTRALIZATION OF EUROPE IN THE WEST

From the geographic location of primary EU institutions, an unequal representation and validity of Eastern perspectives and concerns in EU discourse, and the uneven allocation of resources throughout the European Union.



ABANDONMENT & DISCONNECTEDNESS

The voices of individuals and states of Eastern Europe will continue to be marginalized as long as Western Europe dismisses the historical trauma of abandonment and occupation. Communities with these experiences feel cut-off and isolated from a core European identity perpetuating a lack of trust.

CHALLENGES

● Weaponization of Memory

Memory narratives are often invoked and utilized primarily as a means to polarize and further divide different groups. It is used as a mobilizing tool rather than a reconciliatory tool

● No Clean Hands in History

The histories of states are often perceived in terms of black and white, but in reality, they are grey. National actors are reluctant to communicate honestly about their own responsibility in conflicts and atrocities.

● Lack of Safe Spaces

There are limited opportunities for actors and individuals from Eastern and Western historical backgrounds to discuss, understand, and explore contrasting historical views post WWII.

“The wounds of collective memory are arguably difficult to heal if they go publicly unnoticed.”

(Mälksöö, 2006)

SOLUTIONS

EU-Level

European institutions should aim for a better political and geographical inclusion of Eastern Europe. This starts with easier access to key roles inside the institutions, a louder voice for Eastern Europe's civil societies, and an inclusive representation of the plural narratives of European History.

State Level

Such problems can only be solved in the context of a constructive public debate, where history is discussed and presented in a non-partisan approach. Governments shall renounce to use history as a tool of indoctrination, or to propagate ideologies. National museums, schools, monuments, will need to adapt their representation of history to take into account the different views it carries. Better funding for research projects is also needed to encourage the emergence of new perspectives.

Individual level

We should, as individuals, acknowledge the incredible diverse richness of the European Continent and its history. We need to continually strive for a better understanding and assist in a destigmatisation of Eastern Europe. We must open our minds, broaden our individual perspective on who and what Europe is. This happens as we initiate an increased number of exchanges, while cultivating our media literacy and knowledge of these diverse narratives.

THE RECONCILIATION NEEDED FOR AN EXPANDING EUROPE

The European Union has continued to expand, but the perceptions of our collective past, identities, and memories have not. Though economical and political cooperation abound, there exists tremendous space to further reconcile the contrasting memory narratives in Europe to promote greater cooperation between all states within the Union. Many of these narratives still have yet to be recognized and incorporated into the “core” European story.

As the European Union continues to respond to internal and international challenges, and prepares for a new stage of potential expansion, only the reconciliation of memory will pave the path to ensure a unified and strong Union. The full inclusion of the myriad of memories, perspectives, and narratives that make it up is vital to an EU that lasts.