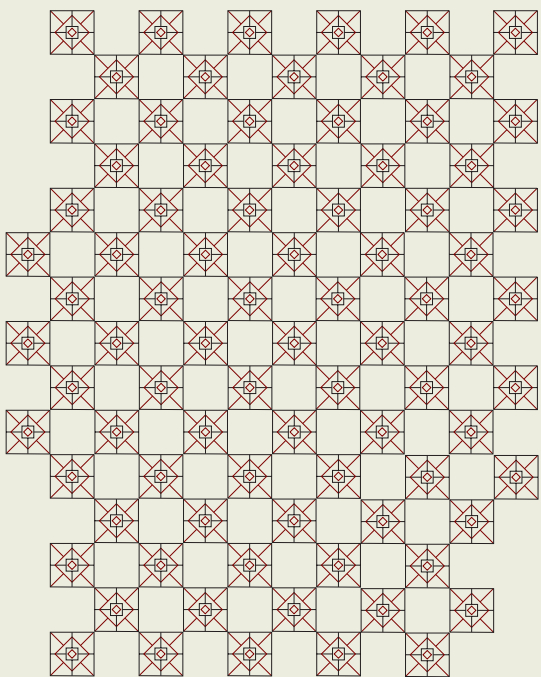
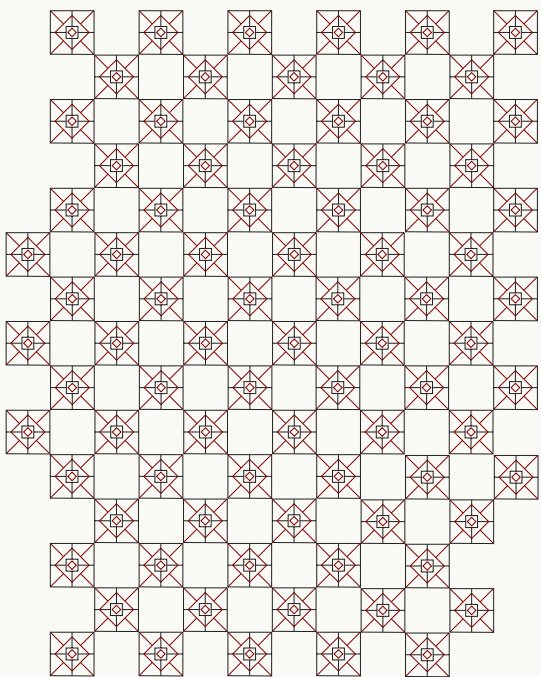




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*Znanstvena revija za
zgodovinske in
sorodna področja*

IX/1



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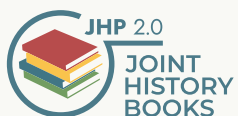
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Teaching History in Contemporary Balkans:

*A Comparative Analysis Based on the Survey
of the Observatory on History Teaching in
Europe*

Angelos Palikidis

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ABSTRACT

This paper offers an overview of the latest survey on history teaching in Europe (2021-3), focusing on Southeast European countries (Albania, Cyprus, Greece, North Macedonia, Serbia, Slovenia, Türkiye). It demonstrates how curricula and textbooks are developed within different administrative structures. Results show that while national history remains prominent, there is a growing emphasis on European and world history. Teachers face challenges such as rigid curricula, overloaded content, and limited training in modern perspectives. A gap persists between academic and school history, especially in emerging fields in historiography, like gender, cultural, environmental studies, memory, and migration. Despite rapid digitalization, formal education struggles to integrate these developments, affecting students' historical thinking.

Keywords

survey, history didactics, history education, Balkans, history curricula, textbooks

IZVLEČEK

Prispevek ponuja pregled najnovejše raziskave o poučevanju zgodovine v Evropi (2021–2023), s poudarkom na državah jugovzhodne Evrope (Albanija, Ciper, Grčija, Severna Makedonija, Srbija, Slovenija, Turčija). Prikazuje, kako se učni načrti in učbeniki razvijajo znotraj različnih upravnih struktur. Rezultati kažejo, da nacionalna zgodovina ostaja pomembna, hkrati pa se vse bolj poudarjata evropska in svetovna zgodovina. Učitelji se soočajo z izzivi, kot so toga učna načrtovanja, preobsežne vsebine in omejeno usposabljanje za sodobne pristope. Še vedno obstaja vrzel med akademsko in šolsko zgodovino, zlasti na novih področjih zgodovinopisja, kot so študije spola, kulturne in okoljske študije, spomin ter migracije. Kljub hitri digitalizaciji formalno izobraževanje težko vključuje te novosti, kar vpliva na razvoj zgodovinskega mišljenja pri učencih in dijakih.

Ključne besede

raziskava, didaktika zgodovine, zgodovinsko izobraževanje, Balkan, učni načrti za zgodovino, učbeniki

INTRODUCTION

Since its establishment as a distinct school subject in the educational systems of the nation-states history teaching has held significant importance in shaping collective identities –national, ethnic, religious and regional – as well as in fostering a sense of belonging among different or even diverse groups and communities. Over the past two centuries, the so-called “national historians” developed long, nation-centered narratives upon which the national identities of their peoples were built. These identities were grounded on two imaginary perceptions: the image of the national self and the image of the “evil other”. Ethnocentric narratives taught in the schools of European nation-states were based on this Manichaeian pattern. Histories of eternal national, international, or internal conflicts fostered the obsession that ideal societies are homogeneous—comprising individuals with the same origins, race, language, and faith or doctrine—that threatened homogeneity should be eliminated or marginalized.¹

From the end of the 19th century and throughout most of the 20th, history teaching reproduced and disseminated the official narratives of nation-states, serving as a main pillar of irredentism and territorial claims against neighboring countries.² Especially in the Balkans, a region characterized by significant ethno-cultural diversity, the “grand ideas”—such as “Great Greece,” “Great Bulgaria,” “Great Serbia,” “Great Albania,” or “Great Turkey”—were rooted in a strong collective historical consciousness, primarily shaped in school classrooms. These ideas fueled ethnic cleansing policies and bloody wars, leaving wounds in Balkan societies that persist to this day.³

1 Carretero, Mario, Rodríguez-Moneo, María and Mikel Asensio. *History Education and the Construction of a National Identity*. Charlotte: Information Age Publishing Inc., 2012.

2 See: Mirela-Luminita Murgescu, ed. *Teaching Modern Southeast European History*. Alternative Educational Materials. Workbook 2: Nations and States in Southeast Europe. Thessaloniki: CDRSEE, 2005.

3 Luigi Cajani, Simone Lässig in Maria Repoussi, ed. *The Palgrave Handbook of Conflict and History Education in the Post-Cold War Era*. Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.

The scope of historical education is also complemented by other formal, informal, and non-formal forms of collective historical education, which are part of an open hybrid space known as “public history.” These include political discourses, school ceremonies, illustrations on schools and public buildings and spaces, historical anniversaries, military education, monuments, literature, cinema, television, comics, the press, and the internet. Conversely, public space—whether conventional or digital, real or imagined—allows national, ethnic, racial, linguistic, religious, sexual, and other minorities to oppose the dominant group’s narrative by asserting their own right to memory. This gives rise to the so-called “anti-history,” accounts and interpretations that challenge the mainstream historical narrative, exposing biases and omissions.⁴ Moreover, they feel that they are performing a duty of remembrance for those have condemned to oblivion and silence, that is, to what Jankelevitch call “shameful amnesia”.⁵

The complex landscape of contemporary societies is affected by many factors which continuously create conflicting conditions across social, political, religious, cultural, environmental. In my opinion, some of these factors are particularly critical for the future of our societies, as they play a significant role in fostering authoritarian ideologies:

- the democratic deficit of national and European political institutions;
- the prevalence of market rules at the expense of constitutional freedoms and human rights;
- the emerging nationalism, mainly in the ex-communist countries;
- increasing social and economic inequalities;
- large-scale immigration to Europe, mainly from war-torn and impoverished regions of the Middle East and Africa;
- fundamentalism, anti-Semitism and islamophobia;
- the rise of the neo-fascist extremism, xenophobia and racism;

4 Ferro, Marc. *L'Histoire sous surveillance: Science et conscience de l'histoire*. Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1985; Evans, Richard. *In Defense of History*. New York: Norton and Company, 2000, 165–192. Deal, Nicholas, Hartt, Christopher, Mills, Albert. *Anti-History. Theorization, Application, Critique and Dispersion*. Leeds: Emerald Publishing Limited, 2024, 19–34.

5 Rieff, David. *In Praise of Forgetting: Historical Memory and its Ironies*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2017, 64.

- the restriction of freedoms and human rights in the name of anti-terrorism measures;
- the fragmentation of European citizens' consciousness –local, national, European and global;
- the strengthening of informal historical education sources at the expense of the academic ones.

If historical consciousness is the lens through which the past informs our understanding of the present and the future,⁶ then historical education—across all its forms (formal, non-formal, and informal)—becomes a social and political issue. The fundamental question “What kind of historical consciousness do we want our students to develop?” is closely linked to the existential question for our societies “What kind of citizens do we want to shape through education?” and ultimately, “Why do we need to teach history today?” This underscores that historical consciousness remains an issue of identity, shaping attitudes, values, and social and political behaviors that emerge from them.

Despite the many and increasingly diverse sources of historical knowledge, schools still play a crucial role in shaping young people's historical consciousness. Not only does national educational policy—reflected through curricula and textbooks—have a significant impact, but teachers also exercise a decisive influence. Their disciplinary and pedagogical expertise, along with their perceptions of the past shaped by the socio-cultural environment in which they live and teach, are key factors in the knowledge they impart and the teaching methods they employ. Research consistently shows that both the official curriculum and the so-called “hidden curriculum” strongly influence students' ideas.

However, as the primary institutional pillar of history education, schools, along with organizations responsible for teacher training, curriculum development, textbooks, and educational materials, remain mainly responsible

6 Rösen, Jörn. “Historical Consciousness: Narrative Structure, Moral Function, and Ontogenetic Development.” In: *Theorizing Historical Consciousness*, ed. Peter Seixas, 63–85. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004, 63–85.

for contributing, with scientific rigor and appropriate pedagogical methods, to the development of students' historical thinking.⁷

The survey: organizers, methodology, outcomes

The Observatory on History Teaching in Europe (OHTe)⁸ is an enlarged partial agreement of the Council of Europe, currently comprising 19 member states (Slovak Republic and Montenegro joined recently). Following its declaration, the overall goal is to promote quality history education, and its core mission is to provide a clear picture of the state of history teaching, based on reliable data. Through surveys that lead to general and thematic reports, and in cooperation with the European Union and various stakeholders, such as EuroClio and the Georg Eckert Institute, OHTe organizes research projects and on-site events or webinars.

Accordingly, the *General Report on the State of History Teaching in Europe* is the main outcome of a three-year survey (2021–2023) carried out in 16 member states (Albania, Andorra, Armenia, Cyprus, France, Georgia, Greece, Ireland, Luxembourg, Malta, North Macedonia, Portugal, Serbia, Slovenia, Spain, Türkiye). Seven of those countries are located in Southeast Europe (Albania, Cyprus, Greece, North Macedonia, Serbia, Slovenia, and Türkiye). The survey and the drafting of the Report were conducted by a research consortium, composed of the Scientific Advisory Board, EuroClio and four academic experts in history education.

This survey, although not including all European countries, is one of the most large-scale and in-depth surveys have ever taken place in Europe, and definitely it is the latest. A triangular methodology has been composed, consisting of quantitative and qualitative tools: (a) a Questionnaire for the Educational Authorities Survey of each member state (EAS), (b) Teachers' Questionnaire Survey (TES), translated into all languages of the OHTe

7 Seixas, Peter and Tom Morton. *The Big Six: Historical Thinking Concepts*. Toronto: Nelson Education, 2013.

8 Observatory on History Teaching in Europe, *General Report on the State of History Teaching in Europe*, Strasbourg 2023: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/observatory-history-teaching/general-report>

member states and distributed in an online format and (c) a series of eleven Focus Group interview meetings with history teachers and educators (EFG). The General Report was released in December 2023 and published in 2024, providing to researchers, educators, authors and policy makers a huge amount of data to elaborate with.

While the rationale of the EAS was to provide official information, directly collected from the ministries of Education or the competent state institutions, the TES and the EFGs were designed to collect detailed, in-depth evidence at the practitioner level. This method enables official information to be complemented with (and compared to) the teachers' aspects.

In the TES part of the survey participated a total of 6.521 history teachers, of which 61.37 % identified as female and 33 % as male. Also, 35 % come from rural and 65 % from urban schools. Regarding the type of school in which the respondents teach (public or private), the 95 % come from public schools, while 5 % from private.

The data of all types of empirical research have been organized around six sections:

1. The place of history in the educational system
2. History curricula
3. History textbooks and other educational resources
4. History teaching in practice
5. Learning outcomes and assessment
6. History teachers and their education.

Respecting the space limitations of this publishing I will demonstrate some of the most stimulating data, mostly focusing on the teachers' views, methods and everyday practices.

Remarkable differences have been marked among the Balkan countries regarding curriculum development and textbook production. The key factor is the degree of centralization of the educational system of each country. In international research on education policy, a substantial distinction

is made between centralized and decentralized educational systems. The most reliable indicator of the degree of centralization in education is related to the processes involved in developing history curricula. According to recent findings from the OHTE and EuroClio surveys, as well as the scientific literature, at the one end of the spectrum lie countries where curricula are exclusively produced by the ministries of education; conversely, at the other end are countries with a decentralized administrative structure, where local and regional administrations, civil society institutions or minority and ethno-cultural communities are actively involved in curriculum development or, even, are solely oversee curriculum development (table 1).

Member states in which civil society organisations participate in curriculum development	Albania	Ireland	Portugal
	Armenia	Malta	Slovenia
	France	North Macedonia	Spain
	Georgia		
Member states in which civil society organisations do not participate in curriculum development	Andorra	Greece	Serbia
	Cyprus	Luxembourg	Türkiye

Table 1: Stakeholder involvement from civil society in curriculum development

In the Balkan countries history curricula are typically prescribed at national level. According the data provided by the state authorities, while in Cyprus, Greece, Serbia and Türkiye curricula are under the state control, in Albania, North Macedonia and Slovenia civil society organizations may participate. However, in Albania Cyprus, North Macedonia, Serbia and Slovenia ministry officials reported that minorities groups are also involved in curriculum design (table 2). All member states claimed that topics of minority groups –cultural, ethnic, linguistic, national, religious or sexual/gender– are included in curricula. Certainly this does not mean that all kinds of groups have ever inhabited the country or still living in it, have

been included in the curriculum, since it was practically impossible to specify the question to each group; for example, when asked about Roma and Travelers, Greece, Türkiye, and Slovenia stand out. Accordingly, a vast range of responses comes out when teachers asked if ethnic, linguistic, religious and socio-cultural groups are adequately represented in history textbooks; about half from Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia agreed, while teachers from Cyprus and Greece expressed skepticism.

Member states in which representatives of minority groups participate in curriculum design	Albania	Ireland	Serbia
	Cyprus	North Macedonia	Slovenia
	Georgia		Spain
Member states in which representatives of minority groups do not participate in curriculum design	Armenia	Malta	Türkiye
	Greece	Portugal	

Table 2: Involvement of minority groups in curriculum development

In Serbia, the situation is quite exceptional. Eight minority languages are constitutionally recognized—Albanian, Bosnian, Bulgarian, Croatian, Hungarian, Romanian, Ruthenian, and Slovak—along with schools specifically serving minority students. Any of these languages can be used in history teaching, depending on the region. Additionally, adaptations to the national curriculum can be made to reflect the history and culture of minority communities.

Conversely, gender history tends to be marginalized across the majority of OHTE member states, both in the content of history textbooks and in the frequency with which teachers incorporate it into their lesson plans. (figure 1).

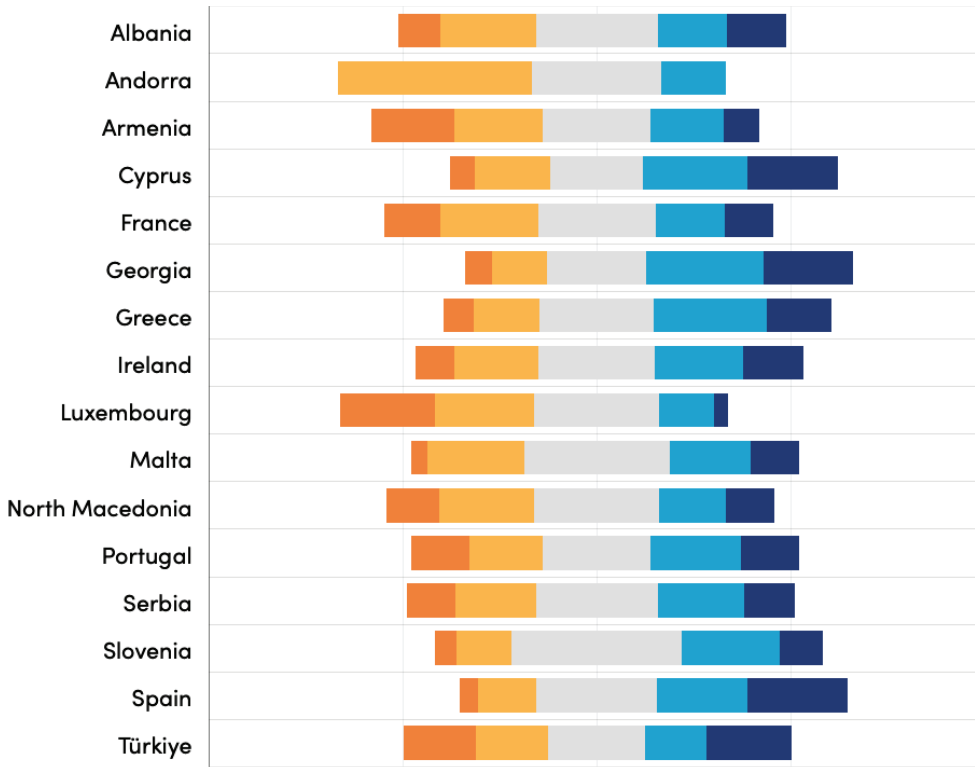


Figure 1: Views of TES respondents, by member state, on the place of gender history in history textbooks (n = 4564).⁹

Regarding the question “How rigid is the curriculum structure and its requirements, and how much room for discretion is there for you to organize your teaching?” (figure 2), the highest number of positive responses come from history teachers in Albania, while the lowest are from teachers in Cyprus, Türkiye, and Greece. Similar patterns are observed in responses to the key issue of addressing diversity in history teaching. Overall, however, many teachers perceive curricula as inflexible and feel there is limited space for taking initiatives or designing their own projects with students.

⁹ The TES asked teachers: “Please indicate the extent to which the following items apply in your opinion to the history textbooks that are available”.

FIGURE 2 ??? **Figure 2 - Flexibility of the history curriculum as perceived by TES respondents, by member state**

How rigid is the curriculum structure and its requirements, and how much room for discretion is there for you to organise your teaching?

FLEXIBILITY OF THE HISTORY CURRICULUM

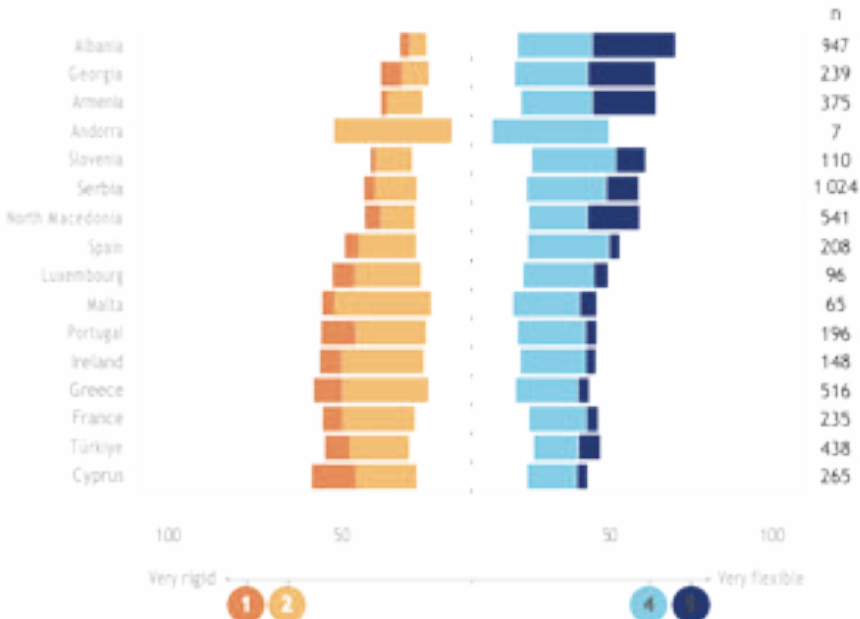


Figure 2: Flexibility of the history curriculum as perceived by TES respondents, by member state (n = 5410).¹⁰

The findings on the use of educational resources in the history classrooms (figure 3) are particularly interesting. Among 17 options, the most commonly used by teachers are textbooks (83 %) and their notes (61 %), followed by websites and databases (51 %) and primary documentary resources (46 %). Conversely, many teachers avoid engaging with non-disciplinary forms of history, such as comics and video games, despite their popularity among young people. Additionally, a notable number of teachers acknowledge

¹⁰ The TES asked teachers: "How rigid is the curriculum structure and its requirements, and how much room for discretion is there for you to organise your teaching?"

that textbooks can impose constraints on their teaching plans, that the knowledge they offer is often outdated, and that textbooks tend to present a nation-centered narrative. It is worth noting that there were no significant differences between teachers from different Balkan countries. In contrast, fewer teachers from Western countries report being strongly bound to textbooks.

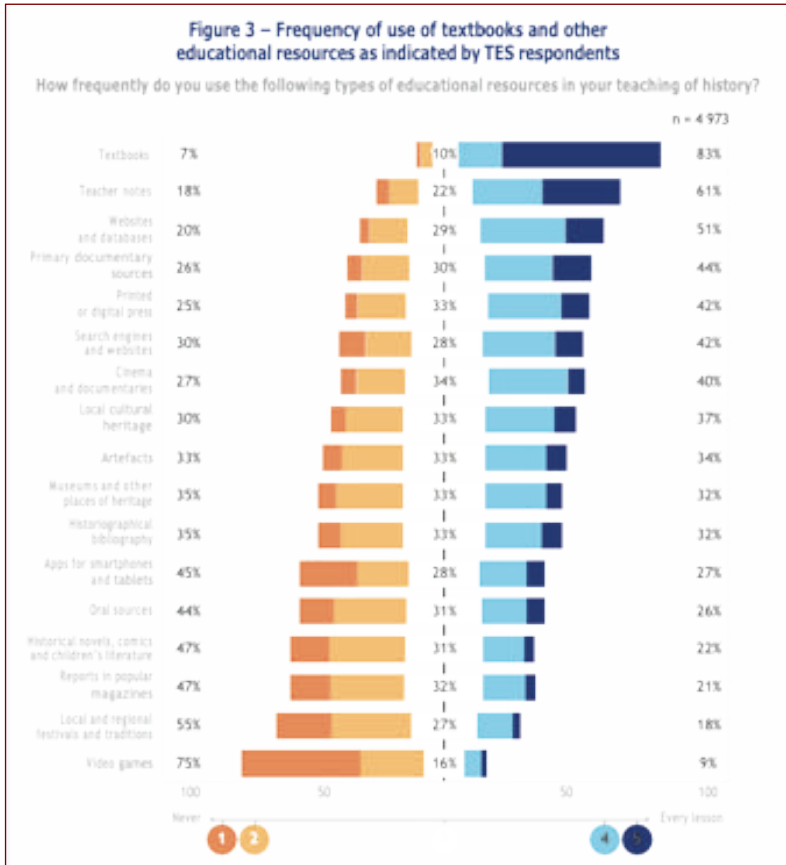


Figure 3: Frequency of use of textbooks and other educational resources as indicated by TES respondents (n = 4 973).¹¹

¹¹ The TES asked teachers: "How frequently do you use the following types of educational resources in your teaching of history?"

In terms of geographical scale (table 3), the great majority of history teachers emphasize national (54,6 %), European (48,04 %), and world history (44,37 %) rather than the subnational and supra-national areas (local and regional). National history is particularly prominent in Serbia (72 %), Türkiye (69 %), and Greece (66 %). Similar percentages are met in teaching political and military history.

Item	National history	European history	World history	Regional history (supra-national)	Local/Regional history (subnational)
Mean (sd)	3.44 (1.58)	3.27 (1.14)	3.18 (1.45)	2.72 (1.19)	2.39 (1.40)
Not very or least relevant (%)	32.52	27.36	33.31	46.69	60.11
Moderately relevant (%)	12.87	24.59	22.31	27.03	13.18
Very or most relevant (%)	54.60	48.04	44.37	26.26	26.71

Table 3: Emphasis on geographical scales of history¹² (n = 4 302)

Regarding the question which forms of history teachers prioritize, social, economic, political and military history prevail. However, other fields, such as art, gender, cultural and environmental history, also take a considerable portion (figure 4). It is important to note that there are notable differences between primary and secondary school teachers; primary school teachers

¹² The TES asked teachers: "How much emphasis is given to the following levels of history? Rank the following five options on a scale from 1 (least relevant) to 5 (most relevant)".

appear to be more open to incorporating new perspectives than their colleagues in high schools.

FIGURE 4 ???

Figure 4 – Perceived importance of different fields of history by primary and secondary school teachers
How important do you find the following fields in history teaching?



Figure 4 – Perceived importance of different fields of history by primary and secondary school teachers (n = 4 279).¹³

13 The TES asked teachers: "How important do you find the following fields in history teaching?"

Regarding methods and teaching practices, teachers identified the most influential factors in their work (table 4). Consistent with other survey findings, textbooks and exams rank as the top two influences, followed by teacher training seminars. At the lower end of the spectrum are students' needs and interests (figure 5). This does not necessarily imply that teachers are unconcerned about their students' needs or uninterested in their interests and concerns. On the contrary, faced with numerous adverse factors affecting their work, many teachers feel unable to effectively meet their students' expectations.

Item	History textbooks	Exams	In-service professional development	Initial teacher training	Student needs and interests
Mean (sd)	4 (1.1)	3.55 (1.17)	3.4 (1.21)	3.19 (1.28)	2.91 (1.44)
(Very) small influence (%)	10.16	18.07	21.93	30.21	37.05
Moderate influence (%)	17.75	25.85	27.96	26.77	24.96
(Very) strong influence (%)	72.09	56.08	50.11	43.02	37.99

Table 3 – Factors most influential in teaching practice as indicated by TES respondents¹⁴ (n = 4 135)

¹⁴ The TES asked teachers, "Which factors are most influential in determining what and how you teach in practice? Ranging from 1 (least influential) to 5 (most influential)".

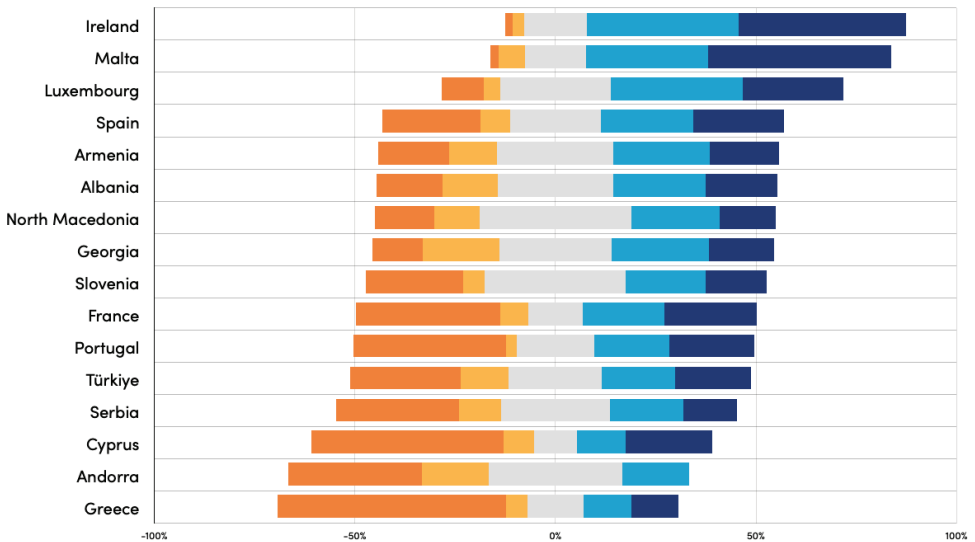


Figure 5: Influence of student needs and interests in teaching practice as indicated by TES respondents, by member state (n = 4 135).¹⁵

Accordingly, at the highest place teaching practices have been set “delivering lectures/presentations” (figure 6), with Türkiye (84 %), Serbia (81 %) and North Macedonia (79 %) performing the highest scores. Regarding the cross-curricular links, history teachers most frequently connect their subject with Geography (86 %), Civics (74 %), Art (68 %), and Literature (66 %).

Finally, some the most significant findings of the TES questionnaire are the outcomes of the question “Which of the following represent your concerns/obstacles for quality history teaching in your context?” (figure 7); in other words, what is investigated at this part are the teachers’ views on the factors that hinder quality history education. Participant teachers could select multiple options from a range of 11 choices. The most cited issues are limited time allocated for history lessons, curriculum overload, and the frequency of educational reforms. Resources and budget limitations, class size, assessment requirements, reduced personal preparation time,

¹⁵ The TES asked teachers, “Which factors are most influential in determining what and how you teach in practice?”.

and the degraded status of history in schools also present significant challenges. Although ranked lower, nearly 20 % of teachers emphasize the lack of appropriate training opportunities and the neglect of best practices that could enhance their teaching methods and approaches.

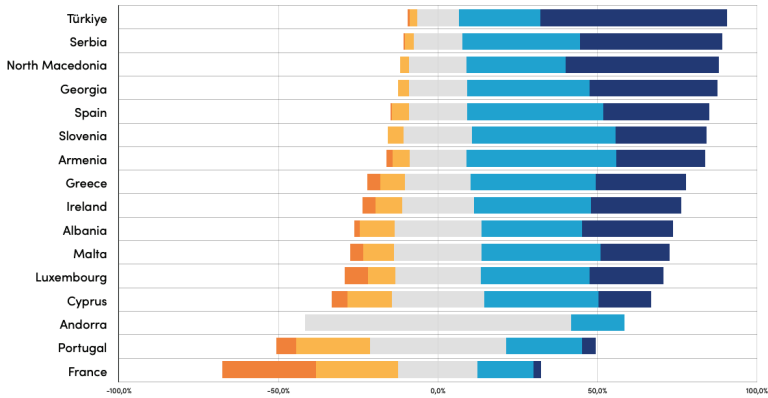


Figure 6: Use of lectures/presentations as indicated by TES respondents, by member states (n = 4 537).¹⁶

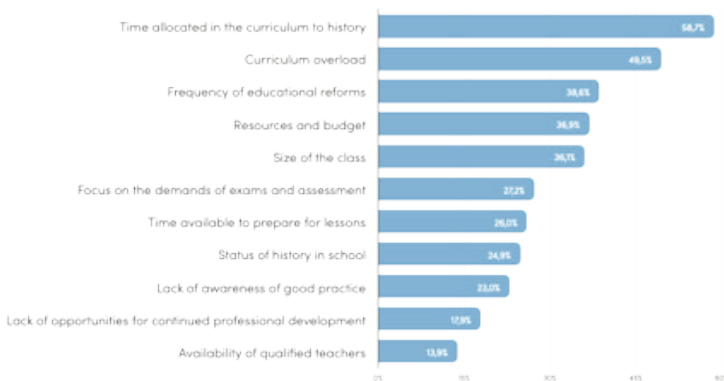


Figure 7: Concerns about or obstacles to good-quality history teaching as indicated by TES respondents (n = 4 606).¹⁷

¹⁶ The TES asked teachers, "How often do you use these methods for teaching and learning history?".

¹⁷ The TES asked teachers, "Which of the following represent your concerns/obstacles for quality history teaching in your context? Please tick all that apply". It was possible to select multiple options. The percentages represent the total number of times each option was selected in relation to the overall responses to this question.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

To sum up, the most critical outcomes of the OHTE survey are as follows:

1. The gap between academic history and school-taught history remains substantial and may be expanding, especially regarding new fields such as gender, memory, migration, cultural, health, environmental, and childhood history.
2. National and European histories are emphasized more frequently than local and regional histories.
3. Political and military histories continue to dominate over other forms of historical study.
4. Public history (non-formal and informal) significantly influences both teachers' and students' historical consciousness, yet formal education appears insufficiently prepared to address this shift.
5. Despite the growing importance of digital history, there is a notable gap in teacher training programs (both pre- and in-service) concerning digital tools and methods that tackle misinformation, propaganda, and the misuse of history.
6. The main challenges faced by history teachers in delivering quality history education include: (a) frequent reforms, (b) overloaded curricula and insufficient time to implement enquiry-based and student engaging learning activities, (c) an overemphasis on content knowledge and linear narratives rather than historical thinking competences and thematic approaches, (d) the prevalence of textbook-centered and lecture-based teaching methods, (e) examinations that prioritize memorization and prove to be key factors in determining what and how to be taught, and (f) inadequate teacher training programs that fail to address current topics or acknowledge young people's concerns.

To this end, international independent projects and initiatives, such as the Joint History Project in Southeast European countries, have made a valuable contribution both to teachers and educators at the national level and to transnational cooperation endeavors.

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POVZETEK

Prispevek obravnava pregled rezultatov najnovejše obsežne raziskave o stanju poučevanja zgodovine v Evropi, ki jo je izvedel Observatory on History Teaching in Europe (2021–2023). S posebnim poudarkom na državah jugovzhodne Evrope, ki so sodelovale v raziskavi (Albanija, Ciper, Grčija, Severna Makedonija, Srbija, Slovenija in Turčija), članek primerjalno preučuje načine oblikovanja učnih načrtov in učbenikov za zgodovino v okviru različnih tipov upravljanja ter deležnike, ki sodelujejo v teh procesih, odvisno od stopnje centralizacije izobraževalnega sistema posamezne države.

Raziskava razkriva, da nacionalna zgodovina sicer ostaja prevladujoča, vendar se vse bolj poudarjata tudi evropska in svetovna zgodovina. Učitelji pa se soočajo z izzivi, kot so toga učna načrta, preobsežne vsebine in nezadostno usposabljanje za obravnavo različnih perspektiv ter sodobnih vprašanj. Študija prav tako ugotavlja vrzel med akademsko zgodovino in tistim, kar se poučuje v šolah, zlasti glede novih področij zgodovinskega raziskovanja, kot so spolne študije, kulturna in okoljska zgodovina ter študije spomina in migracij. Kljub porastu digitalne in javne zgodovine formalno izobraževanje te trende težko učinkovito vključuje, kar ovira razvoj kritičnega zgodovinskega mišljenja pri učencih in dijakih.

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