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POLICY MEMO

Collective Memory and Democratization

by Oliver Schmidtke

Jean Monnet Network : **European Memory Politics**

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EUROPEAN
MEMORY
POLITICS

Collective Memory and Democratization

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Executive Summary

Collective memory and democracy are fundamentally linked. In historic narratives, societies envision their collective identity and the principles on which their polities are governed. Based on a comparative study as part of the [Jean Monnet Network on Memory Politics](#), this policy brief suggests that commemorating a nation's past should not be the exclusive domain of state institutions. Rather, the vibrancy of democracy depends on opening public debates on historical narratives and accounts of a shared past to civil society engagement and contestation. Evidence from various national contexts in Europe suggests that civil society groups are critical for giving voice to those regularly neglected in national narratives and in moving authorities towards the recognition of past injustices. While debates on historical narratives could be divisive, they are likely to contribute to deepen democratic deliberation and engagement. The key policy recommendation of this brief is to encourage state actors to support an open debate on the country's national past and not to obstruct in particular civil society actors in addressing historical narratives and uncomfortable episodes of past injustices.

The Policy Memo

Background and research question

This policy brief is based on a qualitative research exploring the constitutive link between collective memory and democracy. The key research question concerning this link builds conceptually on two essential premises:

- First, there is the way in which democracies learn from their own or other countries' authoritarian history and past injustices. Addressing the legacy of authoritarian rule is key to developing political principles and institutional arrangements to protect democratic life in all its forms.
- Second, there is a close connection between the vitality of democratic societies and their ability to address past injustices in an open, transparent way. Nijhawan, Winland, and Wüstenberg (2018) have shed light on the way in which collective memory and the contestation of historical narratives can be considered constitutive components of a democratic citizenship regime. Normatively, the recognition of past wrongs and victims of authoritarian rule speaks directly to the foundational principles of a democratic political community and its commitment to justice and transparency. Or, as Temin & Dahl (2017: 905) put it, the 'narrative form of historical injustice shapes contemporary notions of political responsibility'.

Methodological approach

This policy brief is informed by a comparative study in the tradition of the qualitative case study approach. The collaborative research conducted explorations into the forms of memory politics and associated policies in various European countries and Canada. The focus of the study was the comparison of trajectories of memory politics in selected national contexts and their influence on the democratic culture in these countries.

Key findings

The key findings of our comparative study could best be summarized in form of depicting most pronounced differences between national case studies:

Arguably, the **Federal Republic of Germany's** democracy matured and deepened with opening up a public debate on the country's dramatic 20th Century past. Addressing the memory of National Socialism and the Holocaust became – after a long hiatus of state-sponsored suppression and collective amnesia in the post-war period - in strengthening Germany's civil society and democratic culture. In her comprehensive study of mnemonic actors in post-war Germany, Wüstenberg (2017) analyzes the so-called *Geschichtsbewegung* (History Movement) that began setting up local chapters in the early 1980s; in the early 1990s, the *Frankfurter Rundschau* estimated that there were 192 such organized local groups of 'history activists'. They were committed to 'Dig Where You Stand' using the local setting as a way to remember the Nazi regime and its crimes. A similar dynamic of relying on memory activism has come to shape the collective memory of the East German Communist rule after 1989 (See [Wüstenberg's interview for EUCAnet](#)).

In **Spain**, a similar process resulted in the so-called *Democratic Memory Law* that came into effect in October 2022.¹ This Law, among other initiatives, mandates the government to exhuming the bodies of those killed by the fascist regime and buried in unidentified graves. This legal initiative has allowed many local initiatives working towards finding and documenting the estimated over 100,000 civilian victims of the Franco's dictatorship to flourish. The *Democratic Memory Law* has not only committed the state to facilitating such acts of truth-finding and victim-recognition under Franco's fascist regime. It has also given voice to marginalized communities and brought recognition to victims of past injustices who have thus far been largely denied recognition in the collective memory of the nation. Normatively, the recognition of past wrongs and victims of authoritarian rule speaks directly to the foundational principles of a democratic political community and its commitment to justice and transparency.

These tendencies contrast radically with developments in countries such as **Hungary** or **Poland**, where a renationalization of historical narratives has led to glorifying the national past in official discourse and punitive action against those who provide divergent, critical assessments of the country's traumatic past. For instance, the Polish government under the leadership of the Law and Justice Party (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość PIS) has reacted to 'heretical' historical statements – most notably studies that have highlighted the deeds of Poles collaborating with Germans in the prosecution of Jews – with draconian measures. Its mnemonic policy seeks to sanction a particular vision of the country's history and to silence critical voices questioning this narrative. Dissent on historical issues sensitive to national identity is considered as illegitimate or even treasonous (Grabowski 2016).

Recommendations

The following key policy recommendations can be identified:

- For state authorities to use history for overt political purposes and to suppress a critical debate on official historical narratives by civil society has a direct adverse effect on the democratic culture of a country. These negative implications are most pronounced in the public policy fields of education and culture.
- While it is standard practice for state actors (from government representatives to institutions such as museums) to promote a particular interpretation of the nation's history, a banning or outlawing of dissenting voices of civil society actors proves detrimental to a vibrant and democratically organized civil society, - and should thus be avoided. Most notably, attempts to control historical narratives from above could contribute to a highly polarized political culture in which alleged 'enemies' of the people are threatened and open public debates are stifled.
- State agencies should actively promote and support civil society's attempts to address formerly neglected or silenced forms of past injustices, - even if confronting these can be hurtful or divisive. As long as contributions to these debates do not fall under hate speech laws, creating room for critical public debate and grass-root initiatives is conducive to deepening democracy.

¹ See: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/11/20/spain-franco-mass-graves-truth-reconciliation/> (accessed February 26, 2023)

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The Jean Monnet Network has established a transnational team of scholars and collaborators addressing the politics of memory, its use in the mobilizing efforts of populist-nationalist parties across the continent and the tension to an emerging transnational memory culture in the EU.

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