



2/2023

## THE EUROPEAN FORUM FOR RECONCILIATION: A NEW FORMAT FOR INTERNATIONAL COLLABORATION AND RESEARCH ON EDUCATIONAL MEDIA

**Bi- and multilateral initiatives that aim to promote international reconciliation and understanding through practices in educational media have to date generally been fragmented and have lacked a consolidated approach. In establishing the European Forum for Reconciliation and Cooperation in History and Social Sciences Education (EFREC), the Leibniz Institute for Educational Media | Georg Eckert Institute (GEI) is supporting and advancing this vital work by initiating a network of multilateral action and collaboration on history and civic education in Europe.**

Since the end of the Second World War, bilateral initiatives around textbooks and educational media have been helping promote reconciliation in Europe by identifying nationalist and xenophobic stereotyping and attempting to move beyond it. Numerous Textbook Commissions coordinated by the GEI have engaged in critical analysis of curricula and textbooks for history and civic education and drawn up frameworks for an education that prepares young people to take an active part in building and sustaining peace and democracy. The results of these bilateral endeavours have informed the development of shared standards for history and civic education developed by organisations such as the Council of Europe and UNESCO.

### THE CHALLENGES FACING INTERNATIONAL TEXT-BOOK WORK

Since the turn of the millennium, this highly successful work has been confronted by a series of political, educational and structural challenges, as well as others relating to the politics of memory and historical culture.

**Political challenges** include the return of military conflict to Europe, the threat from ‘frozen’ conflicts, and the rise of new forms of nationalism and populist movements; phenomena which potentially undermine the perception of a European post-war society that is characterised by stability and was built on the firm foundations of security and cooperation.

### EFREC: SUPPORTING HISTORY AND CIVIC EDUCATION IN EUROPE

Along with other key organisations in the field of history education such as the European Association of History Educators (EuroClio), the International Society for History Didactics, the House of European History and the Observatory on History Teaching in Europe, EFREC plays an active role in the Transnational History Education and Cooperation Laboratory (HISTOLAB), a project run jointly by the EU and the Council of Europe that aims to foster innovation in history education.

EFREC also provides advisory services and carries out academic studies to support the work of the Observatory on History Teaching in Europe. The overarching objective of these endeavours is to create unifying links among diverse national historical narratives and educational traditions, promoting reciprocal understanding around historical constructs and starting and sustaining a conversation about the ways in which the teaching of history and the politics of memory encounter one another in the classroom.

**Educational challenges** have included fundamental shifts in the disciplines of history and civic education; in numerous countries, the teaching of history has lost its centrality to general education and the rise of competency-centred curricula has required an overhaul of teaching in traditional school subjects.

A worrying increase in revisionism presents a challenge in the area of **historical culture**. The use of revisionist arguments by the Russian Federation in seeking to justify its war of aggression against Ukraine is an indicator of the significance that history attains as democratic and authoritarian conceptions of what a society is compete against each other. A phenomenon currently observable in numerous European countries is the use of history education as an instrument for political ends, with historical narratives rewritten and reinterpreted in line with the dominant political interests of the day. The impulse behind this historical revisionism is one of the hostile drawing of boundaries dividing nations from their neighbours and the dissemination of ideas defining the ‘other’ as the ‘enemy’.

Alongside the organisations that have traditionally engaged in bi- and multilateral curriculum and textbook reforms, with UNESCO and the Council of Europe foremost among them, a plethora of multilateral civil society initiatives are conducting curriculum analysis and academic research on educational media, and producing teaching and learning materials. The **structural challenge** in this regard lies in the lack of a robust overview of activities in this field; without such information, it is harder to harness this work to help advance the cause of reconciliation in history and civic education across Europe.

### EFREC: A EUROPEAN NETWORK FOR COOPERATION AROUND EDUCATIONAL MEDIA IN HISTORY AND CIVIC EDUCATION

In establishing EFREC, the Leibniz Institute for Educational Media | Georg Eckert Institute has responded to these emergent and complex challenges. EFREC engages the educational media research landscape and promotes international cooperation by:

- **organising** the exchange of ideas and information among the numerous initiatives working on bi- and multilateral textbook and educational media projects, driving synergies that will reverse the current fragmentation of the international textbook revision and reform landscape in Europe, and providing a long-term forum for information and dissemination around innovative projects in this area.
- serving as an **information** hub for all matters related to the bi- and multilateral development of curricula and educational resources for the teaching of history, geography, political studies/civic education, and religious education/philosophy/ethics in Europe.
- drawing up new **standards** for the revision of textbooks and educational media and supporting the creation of innovative teaching and learning materials.
- working on a consolidated Europe-wide **overview** of the formats, contexts and organisational structures within which state and civil society bodies conduct textbook and curriculum revision activities and produce educational media in this area, of the methods they use, and of the products of their work.

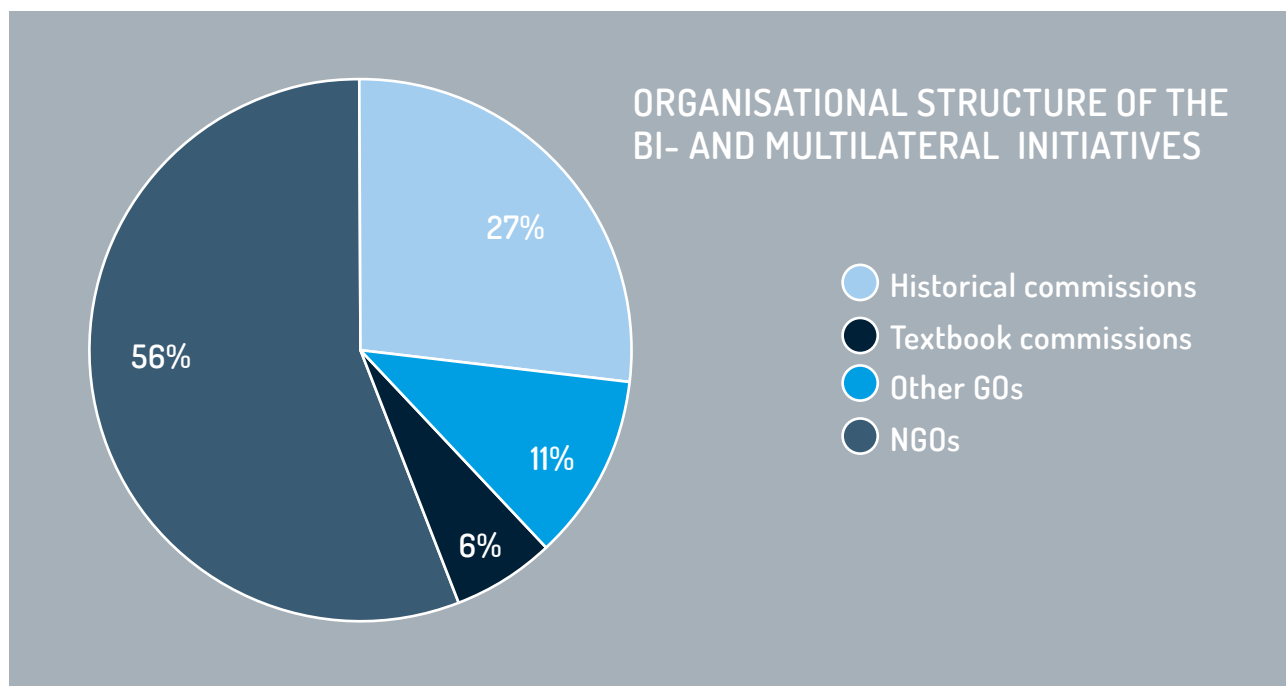


DIAGRAM SHOWING HOW THE BI- AND MULTILATERAL EUROPEAN INITIATIVES RESEARCHED BY EFREC ARE ORGANISED

- **publishing** the findings of studies and enquiries on bi- and multilateral work on educational media and working with partner organisations to hold methodological workshops for those engaged in bi- and multilateral curriculum and textbook revision endeavours; these events serve as forums for attendees to jointly identify conflictual topics and explore new ways of engaging with them.
- working with initiatives based in Central and Eastern Europe, the Western Balkan states, and the Eastern Mediterranean to **launch** new bi- and multilateral curriculum reforms and educational media creation projects; the ultimate aim of this work is to advance mutual understanding among various candidates for accession to the EU – Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, the Republic of Moldova, and Ukraine – and their neighbouring European states, and to provide civil society actors across the continent with the tools they need to work successfully and productively together.
- **communicating** closely with teachers and educationalists, empowering them to create high-quality teaching and learning materials that incorporate principles based on the most recent findings of educational research.

## EFREC'S ACTIVITIES TO DATE

### The Survey

The initial phase of EFREC's survey of activities associated with international textbook revision and reform recorded 100 initiatives running international collaborative projects in this area, 71 of which proceed on a bi- and/or multilateral basis; 23 of these are bilateral Textbook Commissions and committees of historians. Eight initiatives receive state funding and 40 are in the hands of civil society actors.

Most of the initiatives surveyed conduct their work in Eastern and Southern Europe. The school subject of history is the principal focus of 58 initiatives, while nineteen centre their activities on education outside the context of a specific school subject, encompassing global citizenship education, education for minorities, education in democracy and democratic practices, reconciliation, and education on human rights and on the rule of law. Typical products of their activities are textbooks, curricula and teaching and learning materials.

### Conferences and Workshops

EFREC and its cooperating initiatives work together to convene academic conferences addressing different themes in the field of international textbook cooperation and revision, and to hold regional workshops as forums for discussion of current challenges in bi- and multilateral work around educational media, the conception of new projects, and work on products of textbook revision processes.

EFREC's inaugural conference, held in April 2022, explored possible common themes for its members; specifically, the discussion revolved around the contentious and sensitive issues that arise for educational media in connection with violent conflict, in post-conflict settings, and in societies in peacetime. The conference further sought to define suitable formats for structuring international work on educational media and setting out its findings, accounting for the needs of specific initiatives in the field.

EFREC's second conference took place in Paris in September 2022 and aimed to address divergencies in historical culture between the Western and the Central and Eastern parts of Europe and the implications of these differences for international work on textbooks at the European level, and to explore new ideas for twenty-first century textbooks on European history.

Regional workshops held by EFREC and cooperating initiatives in Chişinău and Belgrade in 2023 likewise considered the issue of a new, shared history of Europe whose narrative would give equal space and value to the continent's diverse cultural communities and to their influence on its past and present. The attendees discussed the idea of establishing institutionalised regional centres specialising in multilateral textbook work, noting that such facilities would provide a forum for continuous coordination and support 'on the ground' and therefore have the potential to assure a long-term future for research and activities around textbooks and educational media in the respective region.

### EFREC's Digital Hub: Connecting Initiatives, Advancing Reconciliation

These conferences and workshops highlighted the need for a digital platform for communication, for infrastructure that will continue to serve the field well in the long term, and for a higher profile for bi- and multilateral work on textbooks and educational media among Europe's key institutions.

EFREC has responded to these emerging needs by creating a website that provides a systematic, publicly available collection of information on the various formats, contexts and organisational structures underlying bi- and multilateral textbook revision projects in Europe, and on the methods they use, the products they have created, and upcoming or past events in this area. The website [efrec.gei.de](http://efrec.gei.de) ensures long-term access to this information and additionally serves as an archive for information on academic publications in this area. Plans for an interactive discussion forum are in progress.

## INITIAL FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS OF EFREC'S WORK

- *Implications for the teaching of the school subjects in EFREC's remit:*

The teaching of conflict-laden or contentious issues in the history classroom frequently fails to reference a deeper historical context. EFREC advocates engagement with a long view of historical events, extending substantially beyond twentieth-century history; this will help young people understand more fully the complex, often contradictory interrelationships among historical contingencies and causalities, and will enable history teaching to move towards overcoming one-sided, polarised depictions of victims and perpetrators.

EFREC seeks to promote history education that is built on the foundations of robust research, which can provide school students with the skills they need to recognise and critically analyse historical myths and the endowment of violent events with a sacred status. History education of this type can help young people develop judgement skills, alert them to attempts to instrumentalise historical events and topics for political ends, and support creators of new educational resources in using multiperspectivity and critical debate around contentious topics as guiding principles in their work. EFREC also advocates and promotes the use of novel forms of media and resources, such as websites and podcasts, in the history classroom. Such methods can boost students' media and information literacy skills and encourage all involved to discover new and innovative sources of historical knowledge and its production.

- *Implications for curriculum development*  
Curriculum development should become a more democratic process, taking place from its outset in an environment shaped by close cooperation among all relevant stakeholders – from teachers and academics to publishers and students. EFREC creates frameworks for dialogue that bring all those involved in curriculum development together in comprehensive and constructive networks.
- *Implications for the production of teaching and learning materials*  
New resources for teaching and learning have the challenging task of communicating subject knowledge on the basis of sound research whilst incorporating multiple perspectives, encouraging a spirit of debate around contentious matters and also taking into account the realities of young people's lives. EFREC's digital hub supports this undertaking by providing access to numerous best practice examples of digital teaching and learning materials in their original languages.

- *Implications for quality assurance in educational media work*

Drawing on past work to inform our approach to the challenges of current bi- and multilateral educational media projects is vital to establishing sustainable standards for the production of educational resources. In creating current and archive records of the experiences and products of initiatives working in this area, EFREC has the potential to create a frame of reference for the content and methodology of future bi- and multilateral projects.

- *Implications for communication and the sharing of ideas*

EFREC aims to offer a safe, neutral space for the independent analysis and discussion of conflictual issues in curriculum development and the production of educational media. Educators and textbook authors from societies experiencing active conflict or in the post-conflict period have the opportunity to meet online on EFREC's platform and/or in person at the Leibniz Institute for Educational Media | Georg Eckert Institute to share their thoughts and ideas in an atmosphere of mutual respect and to give and gain inspiration for joint curriculum and educational media development endeavours.

---

## IMPRINT

Leibniz Institute for Educational Media |  
Georg Eckert Institute  
Tel: +49 (0) 531 590 99 0  
Fax: +49 (0) 531 590 99 99  
E-mail: [info@leibniz-gei.de](mailto:info@leibniz-gei.de)  
Website: [www.leibniz-gei.de](http://www.leibniz-gei.de)

### AUTHORS:

Eckhardt Fuchs, Steffen Sammler, Patrycja Czerwińska, Katarzyna Jez, Marcin Wiatr, Dirk Sadowski

### EDITORS:

Nicola Watson and Wibke Westermeyer

### TRANSLATOR:

Katherine Ebisch-Burton

### CONTACT:

Catrin Schoneville  
[presse@leibniz-gei.de](mailto:presse@leibniz-gei.de)

### LIZENZ:

CC-BY 3.0 Germany

urn:nbn:de:0220-2023-0117

