

# Historical amnesia is undermining European democracy



Survey evidence suggests there is growing nostalgia toward former authoritarian regimes in a number of European countries. **Diego Rubio** writes that a degree of historical amnesia is now apparent in European societies, with those individuals who are too young to remember the authoritarian regimes of the past showing more openness toward the creation of authoritarian-like regimes today. He argues that strengthening historical education would help to protect European democracy against these trends.



**1969: US President Richard Nixon with Romania's Nicolae Ceausescu, who was ousted during the 1989 revolution. Today, 66 per cent of Romanians claim they would vote for the latter in Presidential elections. Photo credits: [US federal government](#).**

Let's face it: the rise of figures such as Donald Trump, Marine Le Pen, Norbert Hofer, and Gábor Vona could well be just the tip of the iceberg. Citizens' support for strong, authoritarian-like leadership is growing in Europe, and historical amnesia is playing an important part in it.

A recent study by the University of Leipzig found that one in every ten Germans (10.6 per cent) want their country to be led by a 'Führer to rule with an iron fist for common prosperity.' Likewise, 61 per cent of Austrians favour supporting a 'strong leader who does not have to worry about a parliament or elections' and 40 per cent of the French state that their country should be put in the hands of 'an authoritarian government' free from democratic constraints. A similar dictatorial nostalgia is flourishing in former communist countries. The majority of [Russians](#) (52 per cent) say Stalin played a positive role in their country; 81 per cent of [Serbians](#) believe they lived best with Tito; and 66 per cent of [Romanians](#) claim that they would vote for Ceausescu in presidential elections, a number that represents a 25 per cent increase from 2011.

These data could be considered anecdotal if they did not reflect a wider trend of growing disdain for democracy and increasing desire to return to more dictatorial models of government. Over the past two decades, the share of the vote for populist authoritarian parliamentary parties in Europe has increased by [50 per cent](#), while the number of people considering it 'essential' to live in a democracy has sharply declined, today forming 32 per cent among those born after 1980 according to the [World Values Survey](#).

Analysts have pointed out several factors to explain this trend, such as the public's loss of trust in political institutions after the policies of austerity, and the cultural backlash against changes in social values. But the demographics and chronology of the phenomenon (it started twenty years ago, long before the financial crisis of 2008), suggest that there is at least one more structural driver involved: historical amnesia.



The majority of Russians (52 per cent) say Stalin played a positive role in their country. Photo: [Bundesarchiv](#) (CC BY 3.0).

The vast majority of the people living in Europe today were not born when the 20<sup>th</sup> century dictatorships reached their peak or were too young then to understand their numerous problems and contradictions. This recurrent amnesia is, of course, a common problem among human societies. To combat it, the ancient Greeks developed a brilliant device 2,500 years ago: history. But many leaders and voters in the 21st century think that in our technologically advanced and rapidly changing world, studying the past is not important. Once the core of humanist education, today history represents less than 4 per cent of total compulsory instruction in primary and lower secondary education and is not compulsory for students beyond the age of 16 in almost any country of the [European Union](#).

The effects of this disregard for the past are already visible. According to a study by the Berlin Free University, half of German teenagers 'don't know Hitler was a dictator', and a third believe he protected human rights. A quarter of [British](#) schoolchildren could not say what Auschwitz was. And 55 per cent of trainee teachers studying in Madrid can't explain the significance of the bombing of Guernica.

This goes beyond trivial embarrassment. If people do not know these basic facts, it is fair to think that they know even less about the many drawbacks of these dictatorships, such as the brutal repressions, the constant violations of dignity and civil rights, the marginalisation of minorities, and the high levels of corruption and nepotism. Most of today's young people and adults do not really know what it means to live under a dictatorship. For them, the old authoritarian regimes are just alternatives to the current situation, symbols of a different past – for some, a better one. This historical confusion is undermining support for democracy and increasing the longing for 'strong leaders' like Trump, Putin, Le Pen, Hofer, and Vona, who want to limit the rule of law and undermine the separation of powers in their countries.

What can democrats do to stop this worrying trend? The solution, as so often, depends on our schools. Research shows that, while [there is not always a correlation](#) between a country's level of education and its support for democracy, there is a [clear relation](#) between education and its rejection of authoritarian regimes and values. For instance, polls in Latin America reveal that citizens with no formal schooling are about 20 percentage points more likely to vote for a left-wing authoritarian candidate than those who have gone to college and beyond.

This is mainly due to the contributions of the humanities and social science subjects, which help us to contextualise the virtues and flaws of our present institutions, thereby promoting a more balanced and favourable attitude towards democracy. For that sole reason, we should support these disciplines and make sure that new generations study them as much as coding, engineering and business. Otherwise they may end up repeating the mistake that their grandparents committed a few decades ago: that of preferring security and stability over justice and freedom.

*This article first appeared on the BPP [blog](#) and it gives the views of the author, and not the position of LSE Brexit, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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