

CONCLUSION PAPER

RAN VoT WG Meeting

26-27 September 2023, Madrid, Spain

Younger generations, older tragedies: how can commemoration involving youth support PVE?

Key outcomes

On 26-27 September 2023, victims/survivors of terrorism, representatives of victim organisations, and other practitioners working with victims/survivors gathered in Madrid (Spain) to discuss the role of continued commemoration in preventing and countering further and future violence. Theoretical aspects as well as concrete examples linked to continued commemoration were presented and discussed. Special attention was devoted to the engagement of young generations, who have not directly lived through atrocities.

The following key aspects and elements have been identified and discussed during the meeting:

- Commemoration and remembrance serve as a reminder of 'never again' after atrocities have taken place. However, intentional and collective oblivion can be a temporary but necessary choice after a severely traumatic event.
- The process of remembering takes place at various levels; it can be a personal experience, but it can also contribute to the development of public knowledge.
- There can be a discrepancy between the collective or political need to (publicly and physically) commemorate, and an individual's healing process limiting their willingness or capacity to participate in such activities.
- The role of institutions in collective remembrance is essential. In addition, it is key to note:
 - When remembrance only happens at the grassroots level and it is completely absent at the political and institutional level, it cannot be fully successful;
 - The involvement of victims/survivors is key to identify needs and priorities and to integrate the official narrative that might be promoted by decision-makers.
- Schools can play a valuable role in bridging past narratives into a modern context.

This conclusion paper reports the highlights of the discussion, followed by the various roles commemoration can play, the possible role of victims/survivors in commemorative activities, and specifically how to involve youth in remembrance. Recommendations are presented in the last section.

Highlights of the discussion

The meeting brought together victims/survivors of terrorism as well as experts, professionals, representatives of victim organisations, social workers and teachers working with youth on commemoration and/or PVE and civil society organisations, non-governmental organisations and associations working on memorial activism for PVE.

The complexity of remembrance

Different factors play a role in the complex and constantly evolving process of remembrance, including the non-linear relationship between time and victimhood¹, the heterogeneous group of actors who might be engaged (voluntarily or in light of the tragic events experienced) in remembrance efforts, and the different and personal experiences related to trauma and its evolution. Through the contributions of experts as well as the testimonies of victims/survivors and of practitioners, the participants have unpacked the diverse elements that might affect remembrance.

Liberty or obligation?

There are events that people cannot forget and facts that, because of their nature, their intensity and/or their consequences, cannot be forgotten. Notwithstanding, should people be obliged to remember? Sometimes forgetting is necessary from a survival perspective in order to overcome an in-depth trauma that, for a certain period, cannot be admitted, faced and handled.

In the aftermath of the **Holocaust**, for example, although spontaneous memorials were established following the liberation of the camps, there were no massive initiatives aimed at supporting remembrance efforts. Victims/survivors and their families were in need of creating a sense of belonging and remembering entailing risks of secondary traumatisation and stigmatisation (as it can also today). Consequently, only in the 1960s and 1970s memorials were created and memories of the holocaust were promoted: Primo Levi and other survivors wrote about their experiences only after 1960s, also as a result of an intergenerational transition about what happened.

Similarly, **Spain** entered into a period of institutionalised oblivion in the aftermath of the civil war (1936-1939). Discussion about the war and the dictatorship was limited to the intimacy of private houses for the generation who lived through the conflict, until the time when the third generation succeeded in raising awareness about the memories of their grandparents. One of the success factors of the Spanish memory movement is closely related to the focus placed on civic values and the problematisation of the present, the past and the future.

A similar trend can be noted in **Ireland**, where the civil war (1922-1923) was not spoken about for almost a century.

Personal and collective

The process of remembering can occur at different levels; it can be a personal as well as a collective experience. However, the individual perspective is always connected to the broader community/societal experience, to the point where individual suffering can also be linked to collective trauma.

¹ [ran_testimonials_involving_vot_in_pcve_092023_en_0.pdf \(europa.eu\)](#)

Memory can, thus, entail different meanings and can serve diverse functions depending on the level where it occurs. Memory can be a personal experience, but it can also contribute to the development of public knowledge. In this regard, history represents an archive of human experiences and, through its analysis, a critical perspective on the present can be developed as it offers us different perspectives and meanings that can add to the self-representation of the present.

The role of institutions

The role of institutions in memory politics is not neutral. The politics of memory, through the involvement, among others, of victims/survivors, policy-makers, media and victims associations, represents an effective way to promote democratic values and prevent future violence through media representation.

However, as the memorialisation of an act is a political choice, several challenges and risks should be considered and addressed in the politics of memory:

- Remembrance can become a form of consumerism promoted by politics and this undermines the process and its multiple objectives;
- When remembrance only happens at the grassroot level and it is completely absent at the political and institutional level, it cannot be fully successful;
- The involvement of victims/survivors is key to identify needs and priorities and to integrate the official narrative that might be promoted by decision-makers.

Risks inherent to remembrance

Memory does have a strong integrative function, but it can also be a disaggregating force, it can fuel tensions and be conducive to violent acts. In this regard, it is key to work in a proactive and preventative manner and to work on narrative development before the occurrence of a conflict rather than after. Furthermore, the efforts to keep memory alive should encompass different and heterogenous events: the experience of **Croatia** demonstrates that promoting the memory and commemoration of some events and not others can exacerbate feelings of frustration and inter-ethnic tensions.

In addition, the process of remembering can increase vulnerability to secondary traumatisation, as a result of the confrontation with details of traumatic situations. Furthermore, it can pave the way to undesirable and/or controversial interpretations of the past or it can be confronted with the indifference of some people towards the past and past tragedies.

The specificity of terrorism in relation to remembrance

The memory dynamics related to terrorism present very specific characteristics. First, while for other examples discussed during the meeting such as the Holocaust, there was no pressure to deal with the past, victims/survivors of terrorist attacks in contemporary history are exposed to a tendency to accelerate the process of commemoration.

In the aftermath of a terrorist attack, a plea for memory is brought forward by policy-makers as well as by the broader public. A disconnect can occur concerning the times of politics and the times of victims/survivors: in the first anniversary after a terrorist attack, it is often expected that a commemoration site is designed and/or built by policy-makers, while personal commemoration is moving at a very different speed and it is not a linear process. Personal commemoration might be affected by different individual factors, by how memory is dealt with in the public sphere, and other elements that usually make it slower compared to public forms of remembrance.

How do we make sure to keep the memory alive of attacks, or longer periods of violence, that occurred many years ago?

Humanity has experienced tragic events: commemoration efforts related to terrorist attacks can learn from adjacent fields how to keep the memory alive of atrocities and violent events that occurred many years ago.

In the Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum three strategic approaches have been identified as pillars of remembrance:

- The involvement of survivors and victims, also in the form of written testimonies, video material and recorded messages. The Museum and memorial hosts thousands of testimonies by prisoners from different countries who survived.
- The use of original items. Auschwitz camp was not destroyed contrary to others and numerous personal belongings were found and are currently displayed on site, including, for example thousands of suitcases and shoes. The use of original goods has the inherent function of marking and emphasising the authenticity of the testimonies.
- Art collections. Art objects can be extremely helpful in engaging visitors on an emotional level, overcoming the barriers related to manifesting feelings verbally.

Schools and educational programmes

On top of transferring knowledge and notions, schools are also a place where values can be absorbed and learned and where past narratives can be bridged into a modern context. Education has been recognised as key in engaging with young people in the promotion of continued commemoration, with the final goal to raise awareness and avoid repeating the same errors of the past. Several Member States have or are in the process of including commemoration efforts into the school system. **Romania**, for example, is evaluating the idea of devoting one hour a week in high school curricula to discuss and study the Holocaust and atrocities that followed after WWII. The use of different IT tools to promote such an exchange is also under consideration.

The engagement of youth in forms of commemoration should be age-appropriate and the emotional and intellectual capacity of the targeted audience to listen, understand and learn from them. The exposure to content that for some is too intense can produce the unintended consequence of distancing those recipients from the remembering initiative.

Making reference to local history can help relate as it makes the reflections more personal and intimate. In **Finland**, for example, an initiative led by the Arctic immigrants Association of Lapland raised awareness, among migrants, on past traumas experienced by former neo-Nazis and this proved to be effective in ensuring the engagement of the target audience, that could sympathise with the “majority” also having experiences challenges and difficulties. The use of means and tools that are familiar to young people can contribute to creating boundaries and make the commemorative efforts more effective. Animated shorts, as a specific example, can help make stories visually impactful.

The learning process is not limited to schools and commemoration efforts shouldn't be either. Families as well as other relevant actors can be informed and, to the extent possible, involved in the process. The positive consequences of remembering can also be supported and hampered by community building initiatives and intergenerational dialogue.

Lessons learned from the past can be approached in informal education settings, including in the social media context. Although providing a broad set of opportunities, the online world can also produce divisive effects. Furthermore, adapting the content to the communication style that is most popular among young people might lead to the risk of becoming superficial.

Recommendations

For practitioners:

- In the history of humanity there are, unfortunately, many examples of past tragedies: the strategies that have been put forward to remember them can also inspire commemoration related to past terrorist attacks. It is nonetheless important to bear in mind that the commemoration of terrorism presents some specificities that need to be acknowledged, including the pressure related to the quick establishment of commemoration sites or signs and the political considerations inherent to terrorism itself.
- The involvement of young people in continued commemoration is possible but requires certain mechanisms to be put in place and some considerations to be addressed:
 - The learning process is continuously evolving and so should the material (both in terms of content and format) that relevant actors use to engage with young people.
 - Social media can be used as hooks to attract young people's interest, but the communication should be then further expanded and deepened to avoid limiting engagement to a superficial level and limited content (in terms of timing and degree of the analysis).
 - The involvement of young people into continued commemoration requires a broader work by different actors, including families, teachers and other stakeholders. The positive effects of commemorative initiatives can be amplified by formal and informal education initiatives aimed at strengthening critical thinking and community belonging.
 - Actors working with young people on commemoration should be ready to address critical questions, scepticism, and denial.

For practitioners and policy-makers:

- Remembering is embedded into and affected by the cultural framework in which it occurs. Memory leads to its most positive effects when it is the result of a collaborative and inclusive decision process. In this sense, the process of commemoration can be supported and promoted, and efforts can be put in place to create a collective and consensual framework of reflection and action.
- Commemoration is different from reconciliation and remembering does not necessarily lead to conflict reparation, which requires, among other steps, the re-humanisation of the perpetrators.

Relevant practices

1. The ["Youth and Memory activism" project](#) boosted the relevance of youth in collective remembrance and memory politics, by stimulating exchanges of know-how and best practices in 3 European countries, Spain, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Cyprus.
2. The [Arctic Immigrants Association](#) works on the integration of migrants in Finnish society. Among the methods in use, the Association puts on awareness raising events to increase knowledge of the past history of Finland: sharing the experience of conflict and human suffering facilitates emotional boundaries among groups that could at first be disconnected.

Follow up

The role of authorities in commemoration processes has been discussed, highlighting the challenges when memory is promoted using a top-down approach or when political agendas affect the decision on which events to be remembered. An assessment of specific case studies could help identify the best forms of collaboration between victims/survivors victims/survivors' organisations, authorities and other stakeholders in the design of commemorative policies.

A joint meeting with RAN Youth and Education working group (RAN Y&E) could contribute to the assessment of the most effective strategies to engage young people in continued commemoration.

The following Victims/survivors of Terrorism Working Group meeting on secondary or re-traumatisation could benefit from also looking into the risks of re-traumatisation in remembrance.

Further reading

- RAN Thematic event (2022) [`Current challenges and solutions related to working with youth on P/CVE`](#)
- RAN Y&E WG meeting (2021) [`Education and youth work: towards effective collaboration`](#)
- RAN VoT WG meeting (2021) [`Incorporating memorial needs of victims and survivors in P/CVE efforts`](#)