

CLOSING THE GAPS

Memory, Prevention and
Social Cohesion in Europe

Report of the
roundtable

Europe House
Sarajevo
24–25 March 2026

OCTOBER 2026 · PUBLISHED BY:



International Coalition of
SITES of CONSCIENCE



ICIP INTERNATIONAL
CATALAN
INSTITUTE
FOR PEACE

CLOSING THE GAPS MEMORY, PREVENTION AND SOCIAL COHESION IN EUROPE

In the decades following 1945, European states invested significantly in the building of official memory cultures, through state-sponsored commemorations, education, and memorialization. At the heart of the European Union's (EU) memory agenda lies a foundational belief: that a shared remembrance of Europe's violent past — centered above all on the Holocaust and the crimes of totalitarianism — could serve as the basis for building a strong and united Europe. Its identity would be rooted in this particular telling of the past, reflecting the joint aim of a post-war Europe living in a lasting peace and democratic integration, and helping to prevent the recurrence of such crimes.

Decades on, the gap between that ambition and the present reality is difficult to ignore. Memory frameworks that were designed to foster a common commitment to human dignity, the rule of law, and peaceful coexistence are showing profound limitations — and in some cases, producing effects that may even contradict their original purpose¹.

The hierarchization of memories — in which some histories receive sustained institutional attention and funding while others remain under-resourced or excluded — reproduces exclusion and historical inequalities and generates competition among communities seeking recognition. Identity-based approaches have also contributed to reinforcing this fragmentation by treating histories as separate, producing compartmentalized memory cultures that obscure the structural causes of violence and injustice they were intended to address. The result is a landscape of irreconcilable memory claims in which the collective reckoning becomes increasingly difficult, and solidarity across communities increasingly remote.

Memory is also more and more weaponized for political ends. Across Europe and beyond, historical narratives are selectively mobilized by political actors to consolidate power, sharpen identity-based divisions, and delegitimize opponents. Governments increasingly invoke historical grievances to reinforce monolithic national narratives and justify discriminatory policies, or use consecrated historical references to confer moral legitimacy on actions that contradict the very lessons of the past.

Finally, despite decades of investment in historical education, commemoration, and memorialization, the knowledge and empathy produced have not consistently translated into the capacity to recognize and resist present-day discrimination and violence. The rise of revisionism, hate speech, antisemitism, islamophobia, and all forms of xenophobia, discrimination and racism across Europe — and the repeated failure of the "never again" commitment in the face of Srebrenica, Rwanda and Gaza, among others — does not expose the lack of awareness but a structural failure of memory policies as a preventive tool.

It was to face these failures that victims and survivors, civil society actors and scholars, and policymakers gathered in Sarajevo on 24 and 25 March 2026. Closing the Gaps was a two-day roundtable hosted by the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience (ICSC), the War Childhood Museum (WCM), and the International Catalan Institute for Peace (ICIP). Participants came together to reflect critically on the challenges, examine the deeper structural reasons behind these failures, and identify what has proven effective and what lessons can be carried forward.

This report gathers the reflections, conversations and insights from those two days.

1 Gensburger, S. & Lefranc, S. (2020). *Beyond Memory: Can We Really Learn From the Past?* Springer Nature.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents the key insights and recommendations emerging from the roundtable *Closing the Gaps* convened by the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience (ICSC), the War Childhood Museum (WCM), and the International Catalan Institute for Peace (ICIP), bringing together memory practitioners, civil society organizations, policymakers, and scholars to examine the role of memory work in building democratic resilience, advancing justice, and preventing violence.

Throughout this report, “European memory” is used as an analytical frame. The report does not treat Europe’s histories of violence, discrimination, and repression as interchangeable, nor does it flatten their distinct causes, actors, and legacies across countries and contexts. What it examines is a structural and historical problem common to memory policies and frameworks across Europe: how memory work is institutionalized, funded, governed, and mobilized politically, and the trends that recur across otherwise different national and regional contexts.

Participants identified five interconnected shifts the field must make.

From institutional bias to inclusive memory governance. European memory frameworks are not neutral. They reflect choices shaped by particular

historical, political contexts and power relations, resulting in significant gaps in official commemorative culture. Building genuinely inclusive public memory requires more than adding marginalized perspectives to existing dominant frameworks — it demands reconsidering the architecture and central assumptions that determine what is remembered and who holds decision-making power, with affected communities participating as active agents rather than subjects consulted after decisions have been made. It also requires clarifying the goals of memorialization: “never again” must mean that, whoever the perpetrators or victims are, atrocity crimes shall never be committed; there shall be no double standards.

From passive remembrance to participatory and transformative memory. The dominant assumption — that emotional engagement with historical suffering naturally translates into changed behavior — is not borne out by evidence. The rise of denialism and revisionism across Europe after decades of Holocaust education, and the genocides in Srebrenica and Rwanda, which took place while “never again” commitments were being institutionalized, illustrate the limits of a model built on the assumption that transmission alone suffices. Transformative memory requires, among other things, meeting people where they are, embracing creative and accessible formats, and making participation substantive rather than rhetorical.

From polarized or consensual memory to dialogic memory. Memory practice too often oscillates between



two limiting approaches: polarized remembrance that weaponizes the past for present political conflict, and consensual “peace-washing” that may smooth over unresolved tensions in the name of reconciliation. In both approaches, memory is understood as a conclusion rather than a process. Dialogic memory — grounded in human rights principles, trauma-informed approaches, and honest engagement across difference — offers an alternative that acknowledges differences, and that seeks to rebuild trust and strengthen societal resilience.

From depoliticized remembrance to accountable memory. European memory policies have largely avoided the harder questions about root causes that enabled past violence — and that continue to operate in the present. Memory that avoids addressing root causes cannot prevent the recurrence of violence; it commemorates it. Accountable memory means understanding the root causes, identifying the responsibilities at all levels, and placing accountability at the core of the remembrance processes; and intersecting the memory work with broader struggles for anti-racism, decolonization, gender equality, and social justice.

From silos to integrated prevention frameworks. Memorialization remains largely confined to transitional justice frameworks and post-conflict settings. It is not included in ongoing domestic public policies to prevent violence, or in development programming. Operationalizing “never again” requires integrating memory into the architecture and policies of violence prevention. It means strengthening the evidence base on its impact, and breaking down institutional silos between memory practitioners and violence or atrocity prevention practitioners.

The roundtable made clear that the preventive and transformative potential of memory is real — and that at a time of rising polarization, historical revisionism, and identity-based violence in Europe, the field has both a responsibility and an opportunity to rethink its practices. The question is not only how memory can help prevent future violence, but also how unresolved pasts can limit European societies’ capacity to build democratic and inclusive institutions and to respond to future crises, such as ecological crises. The gathering was a space not only for honest reckoning with the limits of current approaches, but also for surfacing innovative practices emerging from communities around the world, the new alliances forming across memory work, transitional justice, atrocity prevention, and social justice movements, and the growing number of institutions ready to engage with new memorialization methodologies that seek to enable transformation processes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For Memory and Peacebuilding Institutions and Practitioners

CRITICALLY ASSESS HISTORICAL LEGACY AND COMMIT TO INSTITUTIONAL TRANSFORMATION

- Conduct deep institutional self-assessments that examine whose histories are centered, whose are absent, and what assumptions are embedded in approaches, practices, and narratives.
- Build inclusive structures and practices at all levels with decision-making power, not just consultative roles: diversify staff and leadership, and ensure representatives of historically marginalized communities shape governance decisions, strategies and programming.
- Develop partnerships with affected communities to co-design programs, methodologies, and educational materials and bring this work beyond institutional walls into youth centers, community settings, digital spaces and beyond, using creative, accessible and culturally diverse forms of engagement.
- Invest in youth-led initiatives with real resources, autonomy and ownership rather than incorporating young people as token participants in adult-designed programs.
- Plan for sustained cooperation beyond individual projects or events, including longer-term spaces for continued exchange among practitioners, academics, justice movements, communities, and policymakers.

FOSTER CRITICAL THINKING, PRESENT-DAY RELEVANCE, AND DIALOGUE

- Apply critical pedagogy and redesign memory education: move from transmission to inquiry, encourage questioning of dominant narratives, and help audiences identify gaps, silences, and the structural conditions that enable violence — past and present.
- Draw explicit connections between historical events and present-day realities making memory directly relevant to the lived experience of communities.
- Develop structured dialogue programs — with skilled facilitation and clear ethical frameworks — that bring people from different experiences and perspectives into sustained, meaningful engagement with shared and conflicting histories.

- Integrate a trauma-informed approach into all interventions recognizing that trauma can be not only individual but collective — carried by communities across generations.

CENTER ACCOUNTABILITY AND BUILD ALLIANCES ACROSS JUSTICE MOVEMENTS

- Integrate explicit analysis of historical roots of contemporary injustices into programming, using comparative approaches that connect different histories across the globe to help audiences recognize shared patterns and structural conditions rather than treating each history as isolated.
- Build active coalitions with anti-racism, gender equality, LGBTQ+ rights, disability rights, environmental justice, and peace movements, developing joint programming and advocacy initiatives that connect memory work to living struggles for justice.
- Develop clear internal policies and procedures to guide when and how institutions engage with contemporary injustices — particularly on issues that fracture societies — and establish strategies that prepare staff and leadership to anticipate backlash and defend institutional positions with principled, transparent frameworks.

OPERATIONALIZE PREVENTION

- Map and assess the specific pathways through which memory contributes to prevention and build methodologies and frameworks to assess impact, engaging affected communities directly in defining what impact looks like and in assessing whether it has been achieved.
- Map and integrate early-warning indicators of democratic backsliding into prevention frameworks, systematically tracking indicators such as the erosion of judicial independence and press freedom, the rehabilitation of authoritarian or genocidal figures and symbols, the rewriting or suppression of historical narratives, the scapegoating of minorities, and the normalization of exclusionary or dehumanizing language in public discourse.
- Develop clear internal prevention strategies that define how institutions and practitioners will respond when early warning signs of violence are present.
- Engage policymakers beyond the cultural and educational sector — reaching peacebuilding, security and prevention actors — to make the case for integrating memory work into conflict prevention

frameworks, early warning systems, and long-term protection and security strategies.

- Strengthen collaboration with conflict prevention actors and early warning networks to develop shared frameworks, exchange knowledge, and coordinate strategies that leverage memory as a tool for violence and atrocity prevention.
- Build a holistic approach to violence prevention, protection and non-recurrence by investing in cross-sectoral coalitions that bring together memory, cultural heritage institutions, conflict transformation, peacebuilding and prevention practitioners, engaged in exchanging knowledge, developing shared analytical frameworks, and coordinating strategies that leverage memory as an active tool for violence and atrocity prevention.
- Protect structural independence.
- Actively diversify funding sources to reduce dependence on any single donor whose conditions may compromise freedom of expression and whose economic models are inconsistent with organizations' ethical values and principles.
- Develop internal policies that protect staff and partners from institutional pressure toward self-censorship or depoliticization.
- Build solidarity networks among peer organizations facing censorship, political repression, or politically motivated defunding, and develop collective strategies for creative resistance, advocacy, and strategic litigation.

For Donors and Funders

RESTRUCTURE FUNDING TO SUPPORT INCLUSIVE, INTEGRATED, LONG-TERM WORK

- Shift from project-based to institutional and programmatic funding that supports sustained, multi-year memory processes rather than short-term memory projects or contact-based activities.
- Set explicit targets for funding community-led, grassroots, and youth-driven initiatives, particularly those working with Roma, Sinti, Yenish and other identity-based communities who have experienced structural and cultural discrimination, exclusion and direct violence, and those working on migration histories, colonial legacies, and other historically underfunded areas.



- Fund sustained processes to develop shared evaluation methodologies across the memory field that can demonstrate connections between memory work and prevention outcomes.
- Establish cross-sector funding mechanisms for integrated memory, prevention, peace and security to support integrated frameworks that include memory as a core component.
- Establish participatory mechanisms enabling historically excluded or underrepresented groups to contribute meaningfully to the design, implementation, and evaluation of funding schemes, education programs, commemorative practices, and heritage policies at both national and European levels.
- Support and institutionalize structured cross-sector collaboration among memory practitioners, historians, educators, civil society actors and affected communities working on diverse historical experiences by creating sustained platforms, joint funding mechanisms, and recurring exchange formats that enable equitable partnerships, shared methodologies, and co-produced analyses and interpretations of history, as well as coordinated strategies to address its contemporary legacies.

PROTECT GRANTEE INDEPENDENCE

- Remove funding conditions that push grantees toward apolitical neutrality, consensual narratives, or avoidance of politically sensitive subjects.
- Actively support grantees working on contested histories and contemporary issues — including colonial legacy, racism, migration, environmental destruction, and ongoing conflicts — rather than limiting funding to historically safer terrain.
- Establish emergency funding mechanisms to support organizations facing censorship, political repression, or politically motivated defunding because of their memory work.

For European Union Institutions and Member State Governments

BUILD INCLUSIVE MEMORY GOVERNANCE

- Commission independent reviews of EU and national memory funding to assess which histories receive institutional support, remain underfunded or excluded, and what structural changes are needed to address these imbalances.
- Include memory work and transitional justice as formal criteria in the EU accession process.
- Integrate memory practitioners and their expertise into EU early warning systems, conflict prevention mechanisms, and atrocity risk assessment frameworks, including the EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy, the EU Framework for Atrocity Prevention, and the work of the EU Conflict Early Warning System (EWS).
- Establish dedicated funding within EU peace and security instruments for memory-based prevention work, recognizing it as a long-term protection, peace and security investment.

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