

Report on the Breakfast Debate with Alain Lamassoure on 18 April 2023

On 18 April, we were pleased to welcome French politician Alain Lamassoure, former Minister Delegate for European Affairs and Member of the European Parliament (MEP) from 1999 to 2019, for a breakfast debate on the topic of “Those who control the past control the future”. It was he who, in November 2020 had founded the Observatory on History Teaching in Europe (OHTE) under the aegis of the Council of Europe.

Interviewed by Nathalie de Kaniv, Alain Lamassoure recounted how the observatory had come to be created. He had been surprised to realise that, in Europe, different countries had different visions of the past, and that these differences only served to foster misunderstandings between nations. He made particular mention of the more recent EU members, which still “needed to expunge the past”, as older members such as France or Germany had done in the 1950s and 1960s.

It was this realisation that led Alain Lamassoure to examine the way in which history was taught in Europe and to found the OHTE. With the help of the French diplomatic network, he collected information about the history teaching curriculum in the 47 Council of Europe countries: role of textbooks, teacher recruitment, extent to which different factual interpretations were or were not allowed. The results revealed “a bleak picture”, with the countries in the exercise falling into three categories:

- Countries where schools dispensed “a somewhat biased” and even nationalistic vision of the past: some 12 to 15 countries languishing in “frozen conflicts” fell into this category. There were two striking examples: Bosnia-Herzegovina and Northern Ireland. In the former, pupils attended the same schools, as required by the Dayton Agreement, but were segregated into religious groups, each with its own history textbooks, an arrangement that only served to stoke the fires that fuelled the hatreds of earlier generations. In Northern Ireland, pupils attended schools that were either all-Catholic or all-Protestant. In other countries, especially in the east of the continent, the situation was disappointing but doubtless not as bad. This category also included those regions of Western Europe with nationalist governments, (e.g., Flanders, the Basque Country, Catalonia or even Scotland).
- Countries where history was not taught in chronological order: Scandinavian countries and the Netherlands. These are countries where cancel culture and wokeism have long been the order of the day. To prevent children from having to shoulder the burden of their ancestors’ heinous acts (colonialism, slavery, etc.) or, conversely, avoid inadvertently prompting them to copy such behaviours, the Dutch Council of State had ruled that it was unconstitutional to impose an identical history curriculum on all pupils. Fifty overarching themes, referred to as “windows”, had been established, from which students were expected to select around a dozen. History, now known as “human science”, was now an optional subject. For Alain Lamassoure this was a sorry state of affairs in that a whole generation no longer had access to common knowledge of the past and no idea of chronological order.
- Lastly, for a handful of countries, such as France, Germany, Italy, Portugal and the rest of Spain’s autonomous communities, history lessons were designed to foster reconciliation between peoples. While the darker or more glorious periods of the past were not hidden, the aim was, naturally, to consign the darker periods to the past and start afresh.

For Alain Lamassoure, history was something that should be passed on from generation to generation. In his view, political leaders had to take steps to ensure that people could live in peace, both at home and with their neighbours. Study findings were scheduled for publication by the OHTE at the end of 2023, and it was hoped that the protagonists concerned (teachers, parents, politicians) would express their surprise and suggest potential improvements.

Nathalie de Kaniv then questioned Alain Lamassoure about the notion of "greatness" when teaching history, and, more specifically, whether the distinction between "small" or "great nations" should not be dropped from European terminology. Alain Lamassoure thought not, since Europe consisted of both smaller and larger countries. By contrast, all of them needed to "resist two types of temptation":

- Nations that had been great tended to fondly believe that nothing had changed. It was difficult for a once-powerful nation to admit that its power was a thing of the past. Only two countries seemed to have faced the truth: Germany and Japan. The United Kingdom had demonstrated that it still believed itself to be a great power by voting for Brexit in 2016. Russia still saw itself as a great power through its capacity to destroy. For Alain Lamassoure, France was another example of a once great power that still thought itself vital in ensuring world stability. Successive leaders had adhered to the same European discourse.
- As for the smaller nations, it was time they stopped wallowing in martyrdom. For centuries, the Central and Eastern European countries had been invaded by their larger, more powerful neighbours, turning their territories into battlefields. Yet, some small states seem to forget that they had also oppressed minorities over the centuries.

In conclusion, Alain Lamassoure was strongly of the opinion that nations should be familiar with each other's histories. Smaller countries should cease portraying themselves as victims, and larger countries should not indulge in demagoguery towards their smaller brethren. In France, successive leaders had opposed European enlargement for fear of seeing French power eroded. Instead, it was essential to keep communications channels open on all sides and to remind smaller countries that, while admittedly they might sometimes have to endure the influence of the larger European nations, the counterpart was peace, independence and the freedom to speak their own languages, practice their chosen religions and organise their political systems as they saw fit. They were also able to reap the benefits of a strong global currency and a vast market of 400 million citizens. And, not least, they were represented in those bodies where European decisions were made.

In the question-and-answer session that followed, a question was raised about the need also to consider Europe's geographical context, to which Alain Lamassoure replied that geography indeed imposed constraints on countries. A member of the audience then protested against the description of France's attitude to enlargement, which was little more than a caricature. In response, Alain Lamassoure stood by his opinion, arguing that France had always resented having to welcome new Member States but that such decisions were historically unavoidable and politically valuable.

Another member of the audience wondered what the position should be regarding the accession of the Balkan countries to the European Union. For Alain Lamassoure, Ukraine's potential entry into the EU would be the catalyst that would prompt Member States to review their institutional processes. Few European leaders had taken an interest in the situation in the Balkans. Alain

Lamassoure insisted on the fact that the EU should not let in countries that had yet to resolve their national disputes, or that still bore grudges towards their neighbours, to avoid importing new sources of hatred into Europe. An additional accession criterion should apply, namely the ability to reconcile the national memories of neighbouring countries without erasing the past. Alain Lamassoure was optimistic, pointing out that, for example, Turkey and its neighbours, including Armenia, Greece and Cyprus, had needed no persuading to join the Observatory on History Teaching in Europe.

In response to a further series of questions, Alain Lamassoure was of the opinion that the Council would not accept the European Parliament's proposal to revise the institutions. This issue could well feature in the campaign for the next European elections. As far as future treaties were concerned, a system should be found whereby, if a certain percentage of countries, representing a certain percentage of the EU's total population, ratified these treaties, they should be able to apply them, the others continuing to work to the earlier treaties. Then, to the person who maintained that candidate countries should respect the values of the European Union, Alain Lamassoure replied that, in his opinion, there were two values that should be upheld, namely democracy, and the rule of law. For him, all other rights were not the EU's domain, and countries should be free to deal with such issues on their own terms.

Finally, Alain Lamassoure subscribed to the view of the person who asked him whether Jean Monnet should not feature on the European curriculum, describing him as the "Joan of Arc of the 20th century" given his incredible experience of European and international affairs. He also cited Konrad Adenauer for his insight, Alcide de Gasperi and Paul-Henri Spaak, the true founding father of the Common Market, as other such historical vital figures.

Translation by ISIT students - Edited by C. Cross.