

## **Johanna Atzmannstorfer:** **History lessons: from nation building to a European identity**



There can be no doubt that the European project represents the most exciting and far-reaching development in European politics and society of the 20th century. But while the development of an economic and political union is – despite various challenges – progressing well, integration in terms of society is more difficult.

In this respect, questions like how to go beyond the process of developing an economic and political union, how to foster a European identity and a different mindset arise. All these questions imply cultural aspects and aspects defining what national identities are about – such as history in all its diversity.

When reflecting on the relationship of present and past, it is clear that we think of history in national terms. Even though we have a European reality from a political and economic point of view, this national perception and our experience influence the way we think about the past. Considering education as a form of experience and as an instrument that influences our national perception, a different approach towards European history is needed. This is true, too for the way history and subject matters like political education are taught in schools.

History for instance is still very much presented along national lines, emphasizing differences and “national” characteristic. Creating an awareness of a common European history and commonalities seems to be secondary. This could change if we starting thinking about landmarks of history – the core milestones can be found in the history of each EU member state and even beyond the EU’s borders.

So let’s broaden the perspective: let’s take what’s familiar in European history and add the different national perspectives to get a better and even more surprising textbook. The same applies for political education: Considering that the EU consists of smaller and larger states and accords them equality, it ultimately privileges member states and helps them to improve. Therefore, we should stop looking at the European project as something that constrains its member states and instead consider to approach the EU as an institution that actually supports nation states.

Referring to the initial questions, a change of perspective could be the first step towards a different experience and perception. In other words, setting out a common European conception and then adding on national aspects could help create a different mindset and foster a European identity.