GUIDANCE MATERIAL

FOR UNIVERSITY AND GENERAL EDUCATION TEACHERS ON TACKLING SENSITIVE TOPICS IN A CLASSROOM

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Guidance
material

Guidance material for university and general education teachers on tackling sensitive topics in a classroom

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Information about the project

This material is part of the project "SensiClass: tackling sensitive topics in a classroom" that is led by University of Tartu with support of three partner institutions: Central European University, University of Hradec Králové and SGH Warsaw School of Economics. The project is designed to support and encourage educators in CEE schools in teaching sensitive topics. It can also be helpful for teachers and educators outside the CEE context and serve as an introductory interpreter of the context related to teaching about sensitive topics in the CEE countries. Moreover, it might be particularly useful for the teachers who work with pupils and students with migratory experience coming from CEE and studying in the countries outside CEE.

This material supports discussion about the nature of issues related to ethnicity, gender, religion, political behaviour and, most importantly, introduces didactic methods to teach awareness, develop empathy and respond to controversy, handle offensive comments, create a safe environment as a prerequisite for inclusion. These didactic tools were developed jointly in English and later adapted to local needs with some being translated into local languages to reach wider audience. The partnership intends to expand the guidance material for teachers, whether from universities or general education, that can later be adapted also for youth workers, social workers, and NGOs.

This guidance material is intended to be an aid for teachers of higher and general education institutions in understanding sensitive issues themselves and to provide the knowledge of different methods how to address them. While those matters can be sensitive by their very nature (religion, genocide, position of women), they can also become sensitive because of the audience. The guide supports other materials developed within the SensiClass project (MOOCs, e-modules, e-courses, and the Toolbox), all of which are available on the project website: https://sisu.ut.ee/sensiclass.

A deeper knowledge of these issues, access to resources for reflection and analysis, and methodological tips, will help teachers gain confidence and awareness necessary to avoid unproductive conflicts in the classroom and to enable discussion in a balanced and calm manner.

From
the Authors

We are researchers and practitioners dealing academically, didactically and via research with sensitive topics. For nearly two decades, each of us has been involved in both academic and informal education, implemented within international and national projects concerning intercultural dialogue, minorities, children's and youth's participation, education in sensitive contexts, migration and refugeeism in the context of human rights.

Work with students and adolescents is not only our profession, but first and foremost a passion. It is also a challenge based on "learning through experience" and rooted in the strategies of changing the closer and the more distant world through "small steps". In fact, the world used to be quite distant for us. We were born in times when Poland had been behind the Iron Curtain, just like the other CEE countries within the Soviet sphere. When we were teenagers, the political situation started to change with the collapse of the USSR and the dissolution of the Eastern bloc. When we were young adults, Poland was invited to become a member of the EU. Gradually the entire world started to be at our fingertips.

Years of work in multicultural and international teams, communication in several languages, research, practice, and queries as well as internships and conference presentations in dozens of countries around the world, have helped us to revise our cultural determinism and recognise the need to change the paradigm in education about sensitive topics to make it narrative, non-discriminatory, and sensitive to the ethical aspects of words and images – the very tools used to convey it. We remember the times of single educational narrative, closed borders, and the idea that there is a world outside but not accessible to us due to the political reality. While other cultures, nations and beliefs became more open for young generations, Poland largely remains a country that is monocultural in ethnic and religious terms, where the Others are in most cases citizens of neighbouring countries. This makes our case even stronger. By developing the guidelines material, we are willing to support the teachers in introducing and tackling sensitive topics in their classrooms. We believe that the appropriate way of doing it is by embracing the cultural context of CEE and using it as an asset on this journey.

Urszula & Katarzyna

Glossary: defining key terms

Below are listed crucial terms for understanding the context that emerged during the preparation of these materials. It is not a closed list of definitions. Boxes are provided at the end for you to write down the terms, which you may find of importance when using our materials.

Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) – is not only the geographic distribution of the territories of the countries that constitute CEE on the map of the world, but also a specific social, political, historical, and cultural context, linked to their past of being within the Soviet Bloc. These contexts, responsible for the specificity of life in CEE, play a significant role in how sensitive topics are presented and narrated in this part of Europe not only at school and university level, but also in public discourse. Each Central and Eastern European country has its own specific characteristics. Certain features also make the whole region unique in comparison to the Western part of the European continent (which is also not homogenous). The context illustrates not only the world (its fragment) that it reflects, but also the perspective and the way of thinking of the people who create this world and are part of the society. Therefore, in defining CEE, we subscribe to the existing geographic, historical, and political division on the European continent into Western and Eastern parts. The boundaries of Eastern and Western Europe are flexible and are defined on the basis of historical legacy (those who were behind the Iron Curtain and those who were free), the EU membership (the so-called old and new member states plus those not yet part of the EU), or value criteria such as rule of law or openness to otherness. Our approach will focus on the tangible differences that make CEE unique, i.e. the historical heritage and its consequences.

Diversity is a term signifying various dimensions of differences between humans that relate to cultural perspectives, values, religion or spiritual beliefs, ethnic origin, racial background, nationality, sexual orientation, gender identity, ability, knowledge, age or socioeconomic status.[1]

Education is a field that deals with teaching and learning in school and school-like environments. It can also be understood as the transmission of the knowledge and values of a particular society.[2]

Ethical issues are issues connected with ethics, and so a philosophy or systems dealing with moral values, in other words what is morally right and wrong.[3] Ethical issues are especially important when discussing sensitive topics. Attention to the ethics of teaching materials (photos, videos, texts), ethical behavior in the group and the introduction of ethical principles in the discussion of sensitive topics seems to be crucial in the implementation of classes with schoolchildren and university students. It is also worth reminding about the Code of Ethics for Professional Teachers, the Code of Ethics for Educators and the Code of Ethics for Academic Teachers.

Inclusion – an issue from the area of school organisational culture, which is important from the point of view of shaping inclusive education. The assumptions underlying the organisational culture of the school as an institution are the basis for inclusive activities at school. The concept of inclusive school culture concerns making space for all participants in education and indicates the need for a multifaceted opening to different Others and their diverse educational needs. This concept also applies to the addition of new, previously unmentioned contents and issues, such as sensitive topics.

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[1] Adapted from diversity | European Institute for Gender Equality (europa.eu) and Diversity-Definitions.pdf (ucf.edu).

[2] Adapted from education | Definition, Development, History, Types, & Facts | Britannica.

[3] Adapted from ethics | Definition, History, Examples, Types, Philosophy, & Facts | Britannica.

Inclusive school culture is a long-term process within the school (linked to socio-cultural and political change). It is a process that involves all members of the school community and uses the material and symbolic elements that make up the school. It is expressed in the realisation of the following values: equality, social solidarity, or respect for the right to be different. The inclusive school culture embedded in the discourse of inclusion is an important stimulus for the formation of an inclusive social culture and incorporates issues of inequality in educational opportunities, gender, poverty, ethnicity, nationality, religion, special educational needs, mental health, and disability.

School/university climate and a sense of affiliation to a group – awakening the sense of affiliation begins with the recognition that students enter the classroom with various experiences and approaches to learning. Incorporating these variables to the way we provide learning content, evaluate the students' work and promote dialogue, not only creates an integrative learning environment for the students, but also enables everyone to set new challenges and increase one's own cultural awareness.

Sensitive topics are laden with emotions and/or can provoke fear[4], uncertainty, confusion and appear as a didactic challenge for teachers and educators. They concern private, stressful, or revered subjects, they can stigmatise, be a source of controversy or conflict.[5] These include those topics that have been around for decades in CEE societies, those that have emerged in recent

years and those that were sensitive long ago but have been interpreted in new contexts in recent years. Sensitive topics need to be discussed and demystified in a safe and well-structured learning environment. It is important to realise that sensitive topics can be related to the lives of pupils, students and their experiences. The attitudes of individuals and groups to these issues may evolve.

Teaching in diverse class/group is a process of transferring varied knowledge, building skills and soft competences necessary to understand the value of diversity. This kind of teaching is oriented towards the needs of both a specific minority and majority target groups and adjusting the content and resources to their educational needs.

Teaching sensitive topics – teaching sensitive topics becomes relevant regarding preparing young people to conscious, reflective participation in a democratic society made up of diverse communities, groups and individuals with different worldviews. It is teaching that fosters analytical and critical thinking and is part of teaching for human rights and democracy. It is also teaching that fills a gap in the awareness of young people (pupils, students) in situations where they are not able to participate in discussions on sensitive topics in their peer and family environments.

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[4] Adapted from: Studying sensitive issues: the contributions of a mixed approach | Cairn.info.

[5] Adapted from: View of Undertaking Sensitive Research: Issues and Strategies for Meeting the Safety Needs of All Participants | Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research (qualitative-research.net).

We encourage you to create your own concept map for teaching sensitive topic using Glossary and toolbox terms in our project as expressions to support preparation for discussing a particular sensitive topic.

According to the definition: "Concept maps are graphical tools for organizing and representing knowledge. They include concepts, usually enclosed in circles or boxes of some type, and relationships between concepts indicated by a connecting line linking two concepts. Words on the line, referred to as linking words or linking phrases, specify the relationship between the two concepts".[6]

"Concept maps" are therefore methodical tools that are intended to help with organising and representing knowledge and are related to a given issue, problem, situation. In the link you will find more information and examples.

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[6] J.D. Novak, The Theory Underlying Concept Maps and How to Construct Them, p. 1.

Guidance material for university and general education teachers on tackling sensitive topics In a classroom

Rationale
for this material

Is the classroom supposed to be neutral, objective, and devoid of feelings?
Or is it a space where students and teacher meet for healing,
understanding, and critical thinking?[7]

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[7] Martinez-Cola, M., English, R., Min, J., Peraza, J., Tambah, J., & Yebuah, C. (2018). When pedagogy is painful: Teaching in tumultuous times. Teaching Sociology, 46(2).

This material was designed as a tool for "reflection" for teachers and educators teaching sensitive topics within their curricula and those looking for information about how to discuss sensitive topics with students in schools and universities in CEE countries. Delicate issues may arise at all stages of education causing stress for those studying in higher education institutions and schools as well as for those teaching school and university subjects. Therefore, our material can be useful to all teachers: both those teaching in schools and universities.

In our guidance material we do not hand out "on a silver platter" readymade solutions. We do not refer the readers to lesson plans or curricula developed in particular partner countries of our project. Instead, we invite you to read and use the tools developed within the SensiClass project. We encourage you to critically analyse the literature and search for your own safe teaching strategies which will replace the word "problematic" (being "different", "foreign", "distinct" and frequently associated with effort and additional work) with the word "challenging". In this way our tips will allow the teachers and educators to recognise the potential of sensitive topics and the "potential" of didactic work with the help of these subjects in diverse areas of education both in subject and educational teaching and as part of obligatory and optional classes at universities.

At the same time, we encourage teachers to face the questions that arise from the specificities of teaching problematic content, such as: "how to protect the sensitivities of students from different backgrounds and cultures, how to prevent friction in the classroom, and how to teach contentious material even-handedly, avoiding criticisms of bias."[8] And furthermore, to try to solve to issues related to academic freedom and beliefs and values of instructors themselves.

We encourage you to address – as we do every day – those questions in the context of your own class, group, school, university, society and to reflect on your own resources (knowledge, experience, skills, teaching style), on the resources of others who can support you (the teacher) and your students in difficult situations, on what opportunities you have as a teacher to access objective sources of knowledge and on which educational and academic policies and culture (supportive, democratic, exclusive and closed) you operate on a daily basis. Reflecting on the questions above and trying to find adequate answers for the situation of a class or group will provide us with knowledge about the context and climate of a school or university we work in. We look at the world portrayed and communicated in the process of education through the perspective of our own countries and continents, which hardly makes us fully objective. But are we aware of this fact?

An inquisitive reader knows that there are no universal solutions in the area of sensitive topics since no subject discussed in the context of political, social, cultural and linguistic conditioning with a particular group of pupils or students is replicable or reproducible in a different group. By the same token, no lesson can be recreated in an identical way as they are all unique, distinguished by an inimitable aspect of communication. Through the particular aspects we focus on in SensiClass project, we would like to, firstly, create awareness about how important it is to realise the aims and results (outcomes) of sensitive topics, and thereby better understand the

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[8] [Teaching Controversial Issues Through Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights](#) (EDC/HRE), Training Pack for Teachers, Council of Europe, 2015, p. 8.

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responsibility resting upon the teacher to discuss this type of topics with school children and adolescents as well as university students. Every detail and element, at times an image used or a sentence uttered during the lesson, can have a massive impact and contribute to breaking or reproducing stereotypes and prejudice. Secondly, we point to how important it is to discuss these topics in the context, with reference to concrete examples connected to a particular place, time, situation and people who always have names, faces and the right to dignity (also, and perhaps primarily, in the words and images we use to tell THEIR stories).

Through this material we also want to decolonise the frequently mechanical reproduction of patterns and "narrations about…" in education and relying on the constant opposition: us – them, in-group – out-group, fellow countrymen – foreigners in nation-centric messages which frequently colonise and label migrants, refugees, Jews, Muslims, etc. We also ask about the choice of resources we use as teachers and their validity. **For every source – a map, a photograph, an article, an excerpt from fiction – conveys a meaning in sensitive topics. Every source matters**. It is a piece of a puzzle.

In this regard, it is important to find balance in the educational content through which we will provide space to dominant voices (from our own context) and minority voices, which earlier were (or still are) frequently unheard or ignored.

Hence, we draw particular attention to the political, social, cultural and linguistic context of CEE in which teaching about sensitive topics takes place 'by dry run', without the established presence of 'Others', and often in a not so inclusive and not so diverse school/

university classroom. We emphasise how important it is that the teachers approach the subject reflexively and both parties participating in this type of educational experience have a sense of security. It is particularly important when discussing sensitive topics with a group of students among whom there are those who may be directly affected by the topics addressed (students with refugee background, different sexual orientation, or multiple educational needs). It is equally important in a nationally and culturally homogeneous classroom in which we discuss the subject of migration or refugeeism in theory, without the possibility to base our debate, for instance, on intercultural experiences of students and verification of the presented content. We thus ask questions about the strategies of didactic work in which no student will be orientalised due to "being a Somalian refugee's child" and so "an expert on the country of his father's origin" (a country he has never been to, but he is assumed to be an expert at being the only dark-skinned student in the class).

We ask about the ethical boundaries of words, proverbs, sayings and images through which an average Hungarian, Pole, Estonian or Czech looks at "the Other" and at the same time on themselves, because we are all very diverse and experience different situations in different phases of our lives. We reflect on the factors that produce the students' automatic, stereotypical reactions to "sensitive topics".

It is worth emphasizing here that young people still rarely have the opportunity to discuss sensitive issues constructively, especially at school. This is because contentious, socially, politically and culturally sensitive problems and issues which are in the area of so called "difficult knowledge" are considered too difficult to be

implemented in the teaching process. Moreover, due to the political situation and the threat of ostracism, teachers feel uncomfortable, or afraid to discuss them. Lack of relevant teaching materials or trainings can also strengthen these feeling. Sometimes, not having support in their workplace and not feeling safe, they give up on such ideas and do not raise these issues or try to avoid them so as not to arouse "demons". This kind of situation leads everyone into a so called "dead end". In the times when societies become more and more polarized regarding value-based viewpoints and ideas (let it be the right to abortion, LGBT+ rights or mandatory vaccination), bringing these tensions to the classroom or provoking them unwillingly can only pose a problem for the teacher.

Young people without the space for discussion about sensitive topics in school education do not have a chance to express their opinions, dilemmas and fears. Furthermore, absence of discussion also causes absence of awareness of what others think about the topic and how such content is analyzed e.g. in academic sources. It may happen that for many pupils the only source of information related to sensitive topics is the family home, peers, media and social media. Sometimes a one-sided image of the Other, based on stereotypes and clichés, or a simplified view of sensitive issues may lead to frustration, disappointment, and radicalisation of attitudes. In the end, this image may result in a negative impact on the understanding of important challenges faced by a diverse school community, local environment and civil society. Without the support of teachers prepared and ready to discuss sensitive topics, young people may be deprived of the possibility to critically analyse everyday non-obvious situations and events. At the same time the students may miss the chance to learn the necessary skills of dealing constructively with difficult knowledge and contentious issues.

By contemplating sensitive topics (what they are and what they can become during our lessons) we refer to the need to incorporate ethical, non-

discriminatory content in the teachers' skillset and toolkit, one that considers multiple aspects of the educational story we are communicating. Sensitive topics are not merely an educational strategy or an obligation being part of the didactic process. These subjects concern our friends, family members, acquaintances and ourselves. They demand the teachers to be critically self-reflexive and face their prejudices as well as become aware of gaps in their knowledge about the particular subjects and adept in using various sources of knowledge (decolonial approach). By applying a decolonial approach, we focus on a process which is important in education and through which we reflect, redefine and reconstruct topics, curricula and diverse ways in which students think, perceive and act. We reflect on the school, the community and the society as a whole, and so on the right to hold diverse views.

Every education system and every school functioning in this system are deeply rooted in the colonial epistemology and in a discourse that often evades difficult or inconvenient historical facts and that ignores the voices of the oppressed while whitewashing the brutal face of political imperialism. Every formal education contains a complex network of implicit and explicit practices through which certain forms of knowledge are "legitimised". This means that sensitive topics should not only broaden teachers' and students' knowledge, but perhaps first and foremost "open their eyes" to a different, unorthodox interpretation of reality and teach sensitivity to the cultural and social diversity within the closer and more distant community.

The topics presented in the SensiClass materials (e-courses, MOOCs and e-modules) hardly exhaust all the problems and all the dilemmas connected with sensitive topics in an average school class or lecture room. They do however allow us to present a holistic image of the challenges faced by the CEE countries and their inhabitants.

Approach: reflective teaching

Next to competence, skills and abilities based in general theoretical, practical and methodical knowledge, reflectiveness of a teacher is a key strategy for discovering one's own teaching practice at school. It helps to avoid making and repeating mistakes, particularly while approaching sensitive topics in socially and culturally diverse school environment. Reflectivity enables a teacher to become more open and sensitive to approaches, strategies, and methods of learning about reality. It also contributes to the avoidance of inadequate pedagogical practices, and protects against rash methodological, didactic, and educational decisions.

Reflective teaching is based on continuous consideration, examination and discovery of one's own teaching practice.[9] That kind of teaching requires deliberation, thorough consideration and analysis of a given phenomenon, or a topic in a specific context, while taking into account both the positive aspects and the difficulties that may arise during the work with young people in the educational process.

It means looking at what I am didactically doing, as a teacher, in the classroom and how reflective I am at the stage of searching for sources (preparing for the lesson), deciding on the choice of materials, didactic, methods, and the tools for work. Therefore, reflective teaching is a process of self-observation (self-reflection) and self-evaluation of one's own teaching activities and learning environment (school, university) at the stage of preparation, implementation, summing up, and evaluation of the teaching process. The ability to adopt a critical attitude towards one's own thinking and acting as a process of self-reflection seems to be crucial in the implementation of sensitive topics in the classroom.

Based on the assumption that reflective teaching is also an important personal tool that teachers can use in getting to know themselves as educators (who are also laden with stereotypes and bound by various relationships), we use the so-called reflective approach in the following material. It takes the form Questions and Tips.

In these sections we do not provide readymade answers, but **give teachers space for self-reflection, reflection on the context, thinking about possibilities, resources, strategies, methods, opportunities, looking at the constructs and processes that affect their daily work in the country they live in, the system they work in and the environment they belong to**.

The task of the reflective practitioner is to make (…) tacit or implicit knowledge explicit by reflection on action, by constantly generating questions and checking our emerging theories with both personal past experiences and with the reflection of others.[10]

These resources are intended for teachers of various types of schools and universities from CEE countries as well as for all interested teachers and educators from other countries (especially in their work with students from CEE countries). The Salamanca Declaration[11] points out that schools appear to be important places for reducing discriminatory attitudes, building an inclusive society and providing education for all. Thus, the school is expected to be an institution that promotes and implements non-discriminatory social activities and, above all, sensitizes and empowers individual members of the school community, respecting their educational needs, but also those arising from their gender, culture, origin, religion, minority background, status or social stratum. Consequently, the school seems to be a key place for educating pupils in the assessment of contemporary sensitive topics, and the teacher seems to be the key initiator and facilitator of this process.

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[9] Brookfield, S. (2017). Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher, 2nd ed. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

[10] Williams, M. and R. L. Burden (1997). Psychology for language teachers: A social constructive approach. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[11] United Nations General Assembly (1994). The Salamanca Declaration and Guidelines for Action on Special Educational Needs adopted by the World Conference on Special Educational Needs: Access and Quality, Salamanca, UNESCO, pp. 7–9.

CEE's multi-contextual character, historical conditioning of teaching about "Others" (rarely with Others or by Others) and the long-standing tabooing of sensitive topics in the school education cause that many of the assumptions above are not met. Many teacher training institutions do not prepare prospective teachers to discuss sensitive topics with school pupils thus sustaining tabooisation of sensitive topics. Moreover, both new and very experienced teachers are not provided mentoring and supervision or general support that should be offered. Further issue relates to school as a fortress, which is removed from the contemporary students' possibilities and knowledge.

We refer to an inclusive and open approach to teaching and learning, based on endorsement and mutual cooperation. We draw attention to the importance of the teacher's reflexivity, self-reflection and rational action in the school and the safety of being part of a community.

Task

Think about how teachers in your country are trained to implement sensitive topics.

Do you know institutions or organisations which train active teachers to implement difficult, sensitive topics

in a non-discriminatory, ethical way based on human rights?

- Who can be a school teacher in my country?
- Who can be a lecturer in my country?

Conducting classes on sensitive topics is not easy and requires both substantive (knowledge, familiarity with the subject as lack of it can lead to exotisation and/or stereotypisation) and methodological (selection of content, means, scope of the content, sources of reliable, ethical and non-discriminatory information and images) competences.

What are sensitive topics?

Before looking at examples of strategies and approaches that support ethical and reflective teaching of sensitive topics, let us first try to reflect on the key questions. The answers to them will vary, depending on the country, political, social, cultural, educational and historical context. However, it is worth orienting ourselves in our own knowledge and looking at the resources and needs necessary to implement sensitive topics. Below you will find examples of "sensitive topics" from everyday life that your students encounter in the media daily.

Before looking at examples of strategies and approaches that support ethical and reflective teaching of sensitive topics, let us first try to reflect on the key questions. The answers to them will vary, depending on the country, political, social, cultural, educational and historical context. However, it is worth orienting ourselves in our own knowledge and looking at the resources and needs necessary to implement sensitive topics. Below you will find examples of "sensitive topics" from everyday life that your students encounter in the media daily.

Race, ethnic origin, nationality, abortion, physical appearance, social class, sexual orientation, health, disability, religion, migration, nationalism, gender identity, climate changes…

Other sensitive topics, which are becoming crucial for understanding the situation of many groups in the context of global transformations include:

- sexual behaviour or sexual practices
- ethically questionable behaviours
- ageism
- sexism
- experiences of grief and loss, trauma
- experiences of being part of any of the potentially vulnerable populations.

Sensitive topics (the term is explained in our Glossary) can be both local and global. Some have been with a community or group for years. Other issues have emerged only recently. The intensity of sensitive topics depends on the place, time, conditions of the society and public perception. Difficult issues, topics and situations may arise almost daily, dividing public opinion and posing an educational challenge to teachers, students and schools. Due to the inconstancy of the sensitivity of the topics in relation to time, place, and context, their list is not closed.

Sensitive subjects can be difficult in many dimensions because they might contain a spectrum of delicate issues and be connected to painful, unpleasant and sometimes tragic historical events or social situations. Moreover, they are disturbing, provoke questions, challenge one narrative on a given issue and show multiple interpretations, confront individuals with their own beliefs and stereotypes, and provoke prejudices.

"What appears as sensitive or controversial in the classroom can be only partly predicted and 'orchestrated' by the teacher, because much depends on pupils' situated interpretations".[12]

Question
Focusing on your context, what else would you add to the sensitive topics listed above?

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[12] Kello, K. (2016). Sensitive and controversial issues in theclassroom: teaching history in a divided society, Teachers and Teaching, 22:1, p. 37.

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Then answer the questions in the table:

■ Which of those topics have proved to be more "sensitive" issue in comparison in your student group/school class?
■ Why?

Your answers:

Why do sensitive topics matter?

In the face of the policy of multiculturalism being increasingly more often declared a failure in Europe[13], and the various kinds of phobias of Others/Foreigners emerging in societies, the need for education reflexively oriented towards discussing sensitive topics seems urgent. **How else are we to live in the increasingly more globalised world along people of diverse nationalities, ethnicities, religions, origin, or worldviews, if – for these very reasons – they do not fit into our subjective category of "the in-group"?**

This question seems valid particularly in the CEE states, which – compared to Western European countries – still have a relatively homogenous ethnic structure, or diverse autochthonic ethnicities and a small percentage of migrants in the population. Compared to Western Europeans, the views of people in Central and Eastern Europe are more conservative, differing in the importance they place on religion, the view of minorities and their rights, and key social issues. Surveys show that CEE residents are less accepting of Muslims, Jews, gay marriage and legal abortion.[14]

The apparent absence of Others/Foreigners is an additional challenge in the context of school and university education. **Why and how do we teach about Others/Foreigners, if they are essentially not present?** The nature of education in these conditions, largely implemented in a non-contextual, theoretical way, reflects these challenges.

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[13] Guo, D., & Hu, S. (2019). Identity politics and democratic crisis in Western Europe. Chinese Political Science Review, 4(2).

[14] See: Religious Belief and National Belonging in Central and Eastern Europe, 2017, Being Christian in Western Europe 2018.

Why do we need such materials for ethical teaching about sensitive topics?

An ethical approach to sensitive subjects in education makes educators aware of and reveals crucial complexities they can face when they turn to difficult knowledge and address sensitive topics during their classes.

Ethical teaching of sensitive topics is a crucial skill in education that combines theory with a reflexive practice in the contemporary world. Knowledge is also necessary to educate about these topics in a responsible and ethical way. In order to better understand this important aspect, think about how you would like to be presented, both in terms of how you are quoted and how your image is presented, if you found yourself in a daily newspaper or on a website related to a sensitive topic.

A TIP
Think about what factors can potentially influence the implementation of sensitive topics in your school classroom/activity group. The following questions may be helpful:
Questions: Can a class about a particular sensitive topic contribute to the elimination of prejudice in this area? Can it contribute to an understanding how sensational news, fake news, manipulation and media hate work?
Your answer:
Questions: Reflect and answer: What do you think are the benefits of teaching sensitive topics to your students?
Your answer:

An ethical implementation of sensitive topics in the process of education enables both educators and students to reflexively explore a particular topic and look at the process of providing information about a particular phenomenon or a given group through various perspectives.

For this reason, all initiatives in this area are valuable, especially if they are oriented towards the needs of a particular target group, in this case pupils, students and their communities. It seems particularly important to understand the context of Polish, Hungarian, Czech or Estonian cultural, social, historical and educational reality, and so what education looks like in these countries, what it is based on and what content is allowed vs. excluded from curricula. We must also be aware of how problematic it is (not) to use appropriate language in the context of teaching about Other/Foreigners. Living in monoethnic countries, we frequently fail to realise this problem.

While posing these questions, we broaden the perspective by showing the complexity of sensitive topics in the light of the diversity of the four CEE countries. We are thus able to look at and compare their situations with greater depth. It is, however, necessary to do it with caution, as it is easy to draw hasty conclusions and opinions on the particular subjects.

Sensitive topics are significant in education. They change the approach towards a particular issue. The very process of preparing to discuss a sensitive topic makes teachers draw attention to how a particular subject relates to them and their environment (school, university), how it influences them and what its resonance is in the social discourse. It forces them to look at the language of the content, sources, stories, and the language present in the discourse. This in turn draws our attention to how the language shapes the reality, what we think and know about the world, how the language influences our reception of a particular sensitive topic and what means of expression it provides to the participants of this process.

Why regional context matters?

A topic that is sensitive is almost always personal. It means that the topic relates to someone's personal situation, or experiences: sometimes it only scratches the surface and challenges someone's opinion; however, sometimes it goes much deeper and touches someone's feelings and wellbeing. The personal dimension of what makes a topic sensitive depends on the individual experiences, context and discourse, e.g. de ath might be such a sensitive topic for someone who has just lost a close family member. At the same time, it can also be influenced by the local social, cultural or political context, which makes the probability of some topics becoming sensitive higher.

In the case of CEE social and political context plays a significant role in how sensitive topics are framed and narrated not only at school level but also in the public discourse. While we are aware that every CEE country has its own specifics, there are also certain features that make the whole region unique comparing to the Western part of the European continent. Context illustrates not only the world (its fragment, clipping) which it reflects, but also the perspective and the way of thinking of people who create this world and who are a part of the society.

Although we subscribe to the division of the European continent to West vs. East, we stress that these parts have flexible borders and are defined according to the historical legacy (those who were behind the Iron Curtain, and those who were free), membership in the EU (the so called old vs. new member states, and those who are not yet a part of EU), or criteria that are value-laden such as the rule of law, or openness to otherness. In our approach we will focus on the visible differences that make CEE unique, i.e. the historical legacy and its consequences.

TASK

- Think about how we call different parts of the world: why is North America "in the West", China "in the Far East", and Iraq "in the Middle East"? Where is the centre of the world located then? Why?
- Think to which part of the world does your country belong. Is it Western, Eastern, or maybe Central and Eastern Europe? Some other region? Which criteria did you choose to define this belonging: geographical, cultural, political, or else?

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Recent history was particularly turbulent for the CEE region. The territories of most of the present-day CEE nations were incorporated into Austro-Hungary or Russia. Some of them (re)gained independence in 1918 after World War I, some even later – with the collapse of the USSR, and some – as Baltic states – had even more complicated path to freedom. The Yalta and Potsdam conferences in 1945 sealed the new world order that had divided Europe with the Iron Curtain. This is how the first (Western) and the second (Soviet) worlds were created. There had also been the third world: a loose term to define all the other countries that did not belong to any of the two and geographically consisted of Africa, South America and part of Asia. CEE and East Germany got under Soviet influence or became a part of the USSR, so a geographical and mental space in-between.

Years behind the Iron Curtain have contributed to the ethnic and national composition of CEE countries. The Visegrád countries are the most ethnically homogenous of the region, with the majority ethnic group building up from 86% (Slovakia) to 98% (Poland) of the country's population. Other CEE states could qualify as multicultural. However, their multiculturality is of a borderland type. In the former USSR republics, there are dominant ethnic groups, but also significant Russian minorities (from 5% in Lithuania to 28% in Latvia) as well as minorities from the whole former USSR area. Most of the ethnic or national Others constitute citizens of neighbouring states, who often enjoy the status of national minority. There are indigenous, regional, and ethnic groups, who also have been living there for centuries and became familiar to the mainstream society, or even merged to become a part of local cultures. The number of third country nationals is marginal, as the table below illustrates.

Table 1: Non-national population in CEE countries (2019)

Country	Total (in thousands)	% of the population	Citizens of (in thousands)
Czech Republic	557,5	5,2	Ukraine – 129,3; Slovakia – 116,9; Vietnam – 60,9; Russia – 36,1; Poland – 21,3
Estonia	199,2	15,0	Russia – 84,6; Recognized non-citizen – 73,6; Ukraine – 9,8; Finland – 4,7; Latvia – 4,4
Latvia	266,6	13,9	Recognized non-citizen – 205,6; Russia – 41,5; Ukraine – 4,8; Lithuania – 3,1; Belarus – 2,1
Lithuania	47,2	1,7	Ukraine – 13,9; Russia – 10,9; Belarus – 8,9; Poland – 1,5; Latvia – 1,2
Hungary	180,5	1,8	Ukraine – 24,2; Romania – 21,0; China – 18,9; Germany – 16,5; Slovakia – 9,6
Poland	289,8	0,8	Ukraine – 214,7; Belarus – 25,5; Germany – 21,3; Russia – 12,5; Vietnam – 12,0*
Slovakia	76,1	1,4	Czechia – 14,0; Hungary – 10,7; Romania – 6,9; Poland – 5,9; Germany – 4,2

Source: *Migration and population statistics*, Eurostat 2020, for * *Rocznik demograficzny*, GUS, Warszawa 2020, p. 457

The number and proportion of non-nationals in the countries of CEE vary significantly. What is important, the bulk of non-national population is composed from citizens of neighbouring countries, or the so called recognized non-citizens (in case of Latvia and Estonia, in most cases technically citizens of the former USSR). While they are formally non-nationals, most of them share cultural proximity in terms of language, history, and ethnicity. Only in three CEE countries third country nationals who come from outside of Europe are numerous enough to be included among the 5 top nations based on the country of origin. In case Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland these are Chinese and Vietnamese. Their presence is related to the recent history: when immigrants from China and Vietnam came to CEE for education (university programmes: MA and PhD) within the umbrella of the second world friendship and cooperation.

Ethnic and national composition impacts how certain sensitive topics related to ethnicity, race, or religion, and tackled or approached in the CEE context.[15] Racism has been seen as a phenomenon alien to CEE countries. Firstly, racial identities were discouraged in the communist times. Secondly, the concept has been often narrowed to the distinction between white and black – and thus treated as non-existent in the CEE context. Even nowadays anti-Semitism or intolerance against Roma/Sinti are not perceived in terms of racism.

This brings in one more layer to the setting off the CEE context, namely the lack of colonial past or colonial connections (even if they wanted to be a part of such processes). Unlike many Western countries, the CEE states never had any colonies. In fact, many of them had been divided by neighbouring countries and had to fight for their independence. This fact has two profound consequences. Firstly, the CEE societies have been rather focused on what is going on in their countries, setting right their own history and historical narrative. Unlike Western European nations, they have never invaded anyone outside of Europe; all their territorial acquisitions had been obtained by expanding their borders and maintaining the country's territorial integrity. Thus, while postcolonial theory has naturally emerged both in ex-colonial powers and countries which have been colonialized, it has been absent from intellectual reflection in the CEE countries for a long time. Until the early 1990s, many of the CEE countries were dominated by another superpower – the USSR with the Homo Sovieticus concept, though this type of domination has hardly ever been perceived through colonial lens. Rather, it was a direct result of political division of Europe after World War Two into the first and second world. Secondly, years of dependence, two world wars with their grievous consequences and living within the Soviet Bloc, created in some cases a narrative of victimisation, which has been fueling the sense of national unity and solidarity. After the collapse of the USSR, the borders were opened, and many other urgent issues had to be dealt with, such as economic and political transformation or negotiation of national identities (with some exceptions, like Estonia, which used to be ruled by various hegemonies and once it finally became independent the national awakening became one of the top priorities).

Strong 'anti' sentiments constitute the third factor (related to gender, Islam, race, etc.). According to the 2018 Pew Research Center Study, despite

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[15] I. Law, N. Zakharov, Race and Racism in Eastern Europe: Becoming White, Becoming Western. In: Relating Worlds of Racism. Dehumanisation, Belonging, and the Normativity of European Whiteness, P. Essed, K. Farquharson, L. Pillay, El. White (eds.). Palgrave Macmillan 2019, p. 118.

living together in the European Union, Eastern and Western Europeans significantly differ on their acceptance of Others, including Muslims, Jews, and LGBT+ , with the Eastern Europeans being far more unwilling to have e.g. a Muslim or Jewish neighbour. What is more, East Europeans are more likely to perceive their culture as superior to others. This brings back the homogeneity (or borderland multiculturality) issue. Lack of exposure to Others can be one of the factors reinforcing a growing fear of diversity.

All these factors make the CEE context unique, and also generate challenges in teaching about sensitive topics 'by dry run', i.e. without the established presence of 'Others', and often in a not so inclusive and not so diverse school/university classroom. On the one hand, there is the relative homogeneity of CEE societies (relative, i.e. taking into account the borderland type of minorities from neighboring countries). The concept of nation is thus built in the old terms with the core being ethnicity, nationality, and/or religion. People who look different stand out and their membership in the nation might be questioned. On the other, the turbulent historical trajectories make many of these countries inward-oriented. Recent history and its interpretations are still negotiated and sometimes there is not much space to tackle certain sensitive topics just because they have still not been adequately dealt with.

Below you will find examples of sensitive topics from across the region. However, please remember that the list of sensitive topics can be much longer as what is sensitive depends on personal approach. They have been identified by our project partners. Some of them can be found also in Western Europe, although they might be discussed in a different

manner, on a different level and with different intensity, but some seem to be specific to the CEE region.

Table 2: Overview of sensitive topics in CEE context

Women's rights	The traditional role division in a family and women's rights are still an important issue across CEE. On the one hand, the traditional family model is still widespread in many countries. According to between 52% of the Hungarians to over 86% of the Lithuanians, what women want most is home and children. On the other hand, in some countries of the region women's rights movements are active. Although the Czech Republic has come a long way, the glass ceiling is still hard reality for women in many industries. Women are underrepresented in politics (Chamber of Deputies, Senate, Government, etc.) and in the top positions in the public and private spheres. Women also face challenges related to the following issues: employment discrimination, pay gap, and sexual harassment. In Hungary, with policies aimed at boosting birth rates and Orbán government's focus on "traditional families", the role of women is increasingly seen as that of childbearing, stay-at-home mothers. Due to the social conservativism that dominates Hungarian political discourse, rhetorical attacks on gender equality are common, "claiming that so called 'gender ideology' undermines 'traditional family values,' and promotes illegal migration, and encourages homosexuality", according to the Human Rights Watch. In addition, in May 2020, the Hungarian government did not ratify the so-called "Istanbul Convention", or the Convention on Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence. In Poland, a fierce battle over the abortion law which has become one of the most restrictive in Europe is raging. Thousands of women have been protesting this law starting in 2016 when the Black Protest has been organised in over 140 Polish towns and cities. The society is divided between the rights of women (supporters describe themselves as pro-choice but are referred to as murderers by their opponents) and the wellbeing of the conceived one (these people call themselves pro-life but are referred to as the oppressors of women by their opponents).
Gender & LGBT+	LGBT+ movement and the concept of gender are relatively new terms across the CEE. There is still not much acceptance of these concepts in most of the regions except for Czech Republic. Significant minorities or even majorities (as in the case of Lithuania) would not like to have a homosexual person as a neighbour. Moreover, only over half of the Czechs consider homosexuality justifiable. In Czech Republic even though civil unions (or civil partnerships) were legally adopted in 2006, the issue is still debated as the law does not provide the same status for partners as marriage (most notably, by not allowing for the adoption of children). The legislative proposal of same-sex marriage remains controversial, but it has considerable support in the legislative bodies. In Estonia, society is polarised regarding acceptance of LGBT+ community. In 2014, Estonian Parliament passed gender-neutral civil partnership bill, giving same-sex couples the same rights as opposite-sex couples. The bill entered into force in 2016. Although, polls point that with each year the public becomes more tolerant towards minorities, including LGBT+ community, at the same time, since passing the partnership bill, a noticeable opposition to it is growing. It is led by Estonian Conservative People's Party and joined by some parts of Estonian Lutheran Church and focuses on limiting the rights of LGBT+ community, gender equality and normalisation of stigmatisation of that community. In Hungary, the focus on traditional values also led to a strong anti-LGBT+ stance from the government. As a result, a new law came into effect in 2021 that bans the dissemination of content to the minors deemed to promote homosexuality and gender equality. As a result, series of petitions and protests erupted in Hungary, organized by human rights groups and supporters of the LGBT+ community. On the international level, this law was condemned by the EU officials and international organizations. Stigmatization and attacks on the LGBT+ community, motivated by homophobia and encouraged by this law, increased in the country.

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	In Poland, the LGBT+ and gender issues have been brought up to the center of the public discourse by the ruling right-wing conservative Law and Justice Party. A significant part of the country (some claim that as much as a third) has been declared as LGBT+ free zones, or zones free of LGBT+ ideology. The concept of gender (called by some 'gender ideology') and sexual education are also fiercely debated. For the proponents, sexual education at schools means adhering to the EU standards, while for the opponents its aim is sexualisation and sexual confusion of children and youth.
Islamophobia & refugees	Although few Muslims live in CEE countries, some of them have a long historical presence of autochthonous Muslim populations (the Tatars). Nonetheless, strong anti-Muslim sentiments are expressed in many CEE countries. Some of them, especially the V4, actively opposed accepting refugees who came to Europe during the 2014/2015 refugee crisis. In fact, between 30% (in Estonia) to 65% (in Lithuania) of CEE societies would not like to have a Muslim as a neighbour.

During the refugee crisis, there was an unprecedented rise of hostility towards refugees and Muslims in the Czech Republic, which helped some anti-system parties gain significant support (paradoxically enough immigration to the country is very limited). It seemed to fade away as the migration crisis ended, but latent animosity is strongly present among public.

In Estonia, noticeable Islamophobic and anti-refugee tendencies started with the beginning of migration crisis in 2014 and 2015 and requests to contribute to the European Commission's resettlement and relocation schemes. Although there were welcoming voices in the society, the level of Islamophobia and anti-migration tendencies increased. The main factors behind negativity and hatred were the lack of knowledge regarding religions, result of the country's Soviet atheistic past, and strong anti-Islam and anti-refugee narratives shared by Estonian Conservative People's Party. Even though Estonia has a small, historic and well-integrated very heterogenous Muslim community, some groups in society embraced Islamophobic narratives and attitudes. They seem to last, even though only half of the refugees that were allocated to Estonia arrived here and, in the end, less than half of that stayed in Estonia permanently.

In Hungary, the 2015 so-called "refugee crisis" and the arrival of Muslim refugees brought with it a wave of Islamophobia and anti-immigration campaign, which was not a relevant issue in Hungary until that year. The crisis was presented by the government and (pro-government) media as a threat to Christian values, Hungarian identity, and overall European civilization. With migration turned into a political campaign issue, the popularity of far-right movements has increased, and the government tightened the country's asylum legislation. Today, xenophobic and anti-migrant sentiments among Hungarians are of the highest in Europe.

In Poland, the anti-refugee attitudes and Islamophobia were brought to light during the presidential and parliamentary elections that brought the Law and Justice to power in 2015 and 2016. The anti-Muslim discourse has fuelled fears and imagination as Poland had not been directly affected by the refugee crisis, nor by local Muslim population. Anti-Muslim sentiments are strong and widespread, and the marginal local Muslims are not empowered to counteract. |

| Local ethnic & national minorities | Jews: Jews have been one of the old established minorities in CEE who have been living here for centuries. Yet from 10% (in Poland) to 36% (in Lithuania) of population would not like to have a Jew as a neighbour. In the case of CEE, two issues are interlinked: anti-Semitism and the atrocities against the Jewish population committed during WW2.

Anti-Semitism does not seem to be a big issue in the Czech Republic, however, there are isolated incidents, such as among football hooligans singing anti-Semitic chants to insult opponents (this is rather theatrical and a ritualistic rather than genuine anti-Semitism). The extreme right (neo-Nazi) parties also occasionally organize provocative events such as marches through the Jewish district of Prague, but with no positive reception from the majority of people.

In Estonia, the once vibrant Jewish communities that existed before the WW2, never recovered. Due to the small size of the communities, no strong anti-Jewish tendencies are present in the society in general. Nevertheless, in the 1990s and early 2000s groups like skinheads expressed anti-Semitic views. Recently, with the global rise of far-right ideology, there have been cases where anti-Semitic sentiments were expressed by individuals linked to international right-wing organisations in online spaces. Members of the Jewish community have been verbally attacked, i.a. the head rabbi in 2019.

In Hungary, anti-Semitism has been historically widespread, which has culminated in mass deportation of Hungarian Jews to extermination camps during World War II. Today, anti-Semitism is still rampant and is rarely, if at all, condemned on the official level. In education, the new school curricula includes anti-Semitic authors, while Hungary's close alliance with the Nazi Germany is downplayed. With growing nationalism and xenophobia, verbal and physical aggression against Jews has also increased.

In Poland, anti-Semitism is used occasionally, mostly in relation to the WW2 and how the Polish history is narrated in this regard. A lot of attention is paid to victimisation narratives and role of Poles in the suffering of Jews can hardly be touched upon. |
| | Roma: The Roma communities have been living in CEE for centuries, yet they still evoke negative attitudes of local population. In fact, from 31% (in Poland) to 76% (in Lithuania) of CEE population would not like to have the Roma as neighbours.

Quite strong anti-Roma attitudes can be identified among the public in the Czech Republic that sometimes escalate to open hatred and physical violence (in the last decades, there is evidence of several racially motivated violent attacks and even murders). Hoaxes and conspiracy theories about the misuse of the social security system and other privileges of the Roma minority have some popularity. Roma people are a target of ridicule and are seen as by nature problematic. Despite the long-term efforts of NGOs and other state and private initiatives, there is widespread discrimination across many sectors (employment, housing, education, etc.) against Roma people. A significant part of Roma people lives in socially excluded localities. In 2018, approximately 830 socially excluded localities with a total of more than 127,000 people were designated in the Czech Republic. Compared to 2006, the total number of those localities has nearly tripled, with the number of inhabitants increasing by nearly one-half. The issue of socially excluded localities is closely related to educational opportunities as they include the increasing number of schools with a growing concentration and a dominant share of Roma students. A large share of Roma students from those localities does not complete their primary and lower secondary school education. In 2007, the European Court of Human Rights decided that Roma children were discriminated against in education. Human rights organizations point out that the situation of Roma children has not improved since.

In Estonia, the Roma community is a very small one (approximately 500-1500 members). Nonetheless, the community experiences inequality and exclusion in everyday situations. Compared to other nationalities, the Roma have a lower level of education and higher level of unemployment. The popularity of negative stereotypes of the Roma might be partly responsible for that. |

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	In Hungary, anti-Gypsyism has also been strong historically and continues until today. The Roma remain one of the main targets of growing intolerance in the country. Discrimination against the Roma is apparent in such practices as school segregation, crimes, violence, evictions, denial of access to services and acts of institutional and everyday racism. In education, researchers concluded that the Roma are either ignored, or represented in textbooks as "others" and not part of the Hungarian nation. Their stereotypical representation focuses on marginalization, impoverished and backwards life and obsolete traditions. In Poland, the Roma are interchangeably with the Arabs as the least liked national group. They occupy the lowest social positions and some of the Roma children are enrolled to special educational institutions for the intellectually disabled despite not being disabled.
Nationalism	Considering the turbulent recent history and monocultural character of many CEE societies, definition of one's nation is a sensitive topic. The discussions go between two mutually incompatible concepts: an open, inclusive nation, and a closed one that is built on ethnic terms. Moreover, some CEE countries are reluctant to accept immigrants. In Czechia, Hungary and Slovakia around half of the population would not like to live next to an immigrant. Being a true citizen of the country is understood as having ancestors from this country according to between 52% (Estonians) and 86% (Lithuanians) of CEE nationals. Allowing for some oversimplification, two conflicting views of national self-identity prevail in the Czech Republic. The first one is based on a firmly held opinion that the best option is to stay peacefully isolated from the outside world in the Bohemian basin and do things our own way with our "golden hands" etc. The other one is related to the trauma of being a small, unimportant, and oppressed nation in between more powerful states. A special feeling of inferiority might be observed with respect to the potent and economically developed Germany. In Estonia, two main positions regarding own nation and identity as an Estonian compete. The first one is the wish to be a successful member of international community and member of the EU and NATO. The second one, based in recent historical experience of foreign occupation, reflects the fear of losing the freedom, the language, the culture and the state itself. As Estonia is a society where the national identity is linked the mother tongue, questions regarding identity are discussed often connection to education, culture, migration, and international cooperation. In Hungary, nationalism is based in historical grievances and irredentism. In political discourse, nationalism and the protection of the Hungarian identity, culture and traditions have been mobilized to justify various xenophobic and illiberal policies. Furthermore, protection of the Hungarian values has been used to provide ground for anti-EU standpoints, generating a growing sense of Euroscepticism. Some commentators call it authoritarian nationalism, highlighting the simultaneous democratic backsliding and increasing nationalism in Hungary. In Poland, the two concepts of national identity clash. Some believe that Poland should catch up and become a (West) European state, while the Polish history should be re-worked in order to move forward. Others believe that Poland is strong due to its ethnicity, tradition and (Catholic) religion, while Polish history is sacred and should not be negotiated. Presently, a new battleground for defining the national identity are the school curricula and the textbooks, which are being reviewed for the "proper" patriotic and religious values.

Relation to the West & the EU	Since the enlargement of the EU the societies of CEE have been among the top proponents of European integration, while their countries were top recipients of the EU funding. Substantial part of this funding was directed to economic convergence to enable the new member states to eventually catch up with their Western partners. While CEE public is still quite optimistic about the EU membership, some governments in the region started to oppose the EU and question the very foundations of the European community.

The political forces seeking for the "Czexit" exist in the highest legislative bodies of the Czech Republic but constitute a minority. Other and more relevant parties fight against the federalisation of the EU ("ever closer union") and the adoption of the Euro, however, they do not express the ambition of leaving the EU. The mainstream media presentation of the EU is oriented to the subsidies coming from the structural funds (ERDF and ESF) and to the "excessive regulations" allegedly imposed by the European bureaucracy on individual states.

In Estonia, the attitudes towards the EU have also been polarized. The first group stands for historical memory, the desire for greater self-determination and freedom. Any outside regulation is interpreted as a form of a new hegemony coming from an institution who wants to take away the freedom of Estonians. The populists who are proponents of these views take their legitimation mainly from the discussion of the migration issues. The second group sees both the economic and defensive strategic strength in alliances. The corner stone of Estonia's foreign and defence policy is 'Never alone!', which in short, says that the country need strong allies.

In Hungary, political leadership of the right-wing ruling Fidesz party created a new ideology that merged illiberalism and nationalism with a populist, anti-Western and anti-globalization rhetoric. While the EU institutions are often portrayed as enemies in the Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban's speeches, there was an explicit strengthening of political and economic ties with the non-Western countries such as Russia and China. These alliances have been widely criticized by the international community. Interestingly, while Hungary is often portrayed as one of the most Eurosceptic countries in the EU, one study demonstrated that in fact the Hungarian public has an overall positive image of the EU. It is then important to differentiate between the government's standpoint and the popular opinion regarding the West and the European Union.

In Poland, the political shift has been visible with the Law and Justice party opposing some of the EU regulations (e.g. on the settlement of refugees), which were sometimes referred to as an EU dictate. The dominating narrative in this regard is that Poland is entitled to receive EU funding but shall not lose its national and religious identity in order to please the West. |
| **Importance of religion** | The CEE countries differ in their perception of religion. While 78% of the Poles claim that religion is important, less than fifth of the Czechs or the Estonians shares their opinion. That makes the position of the Church and organized religion a significant sensitive issue in some CEE countries.

The influence of the Catholic Church on politics is limited in the Czech Republic. The efforts of its representatives to lobby for or intervene in some sensitive issues (e.g. the protection of the "traditional family": opposition to same-sex marriage and preservation of gender roles, etc.) is occasionally partly successful, but in general the Church has a minimal following in the society and among the highest political circles. |

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In Estonia, before the Second World War, the Lutheran Church played a decisive role in the education, culture, and as a provider of identity. However, since then, the Soviet atheist propaganda has left its mark. In the 1990s, the Church was still a symbol of the resistance movement and thinking differently, while the number of Church members also increased. Yet, according to the 2011 census, Estonia is one of the most secular states with only 19% of the ethnic Estonians embracing any form of organized religion (just 14% of Estonians declare themselves Lutherans), with less than 3% participating weekly in religious services. However, the 2011 census data shows also that the church with the biggest membership in Estonia is the Russian Orthodox Church. Moreover, different new pagan groups based on ethnic and national identity (combining or carrying out the rituals of natural religion) are growing in popularity. As an institution, the Lutheran church has maintained a certain position in the society, including a say in its social organization, but the degree of its power depends on the political support for the conservative populists.

In Hungary, the predominant religion is Catholicism, with over 60% of Hungarians identifying as Catholic. Recently, the PM Viktor Orban has positioned himself as a defender of Christianity while being widely criticized for using religion to tighten his grip on power. He often cites the importance of the Christian roots of the Hungarian national identity to promote an anti-immigration and anti-Islam rhetoric, and intolerance. In recent years, Orban has increasingly referred to Hungary as a "Christian democracy" rather than as an "illiberal democracy". In addition, promotion of traditional values is often also covered in a language of protecting Christian values.

In Poland, the strong position of the Catholic Church has been made official with the Concordat between Poland and the Holy See that had been signed in 1993. The major role of the Church has turned Poland into a moderate quasi-confessional state. A significant segment of the society opposes this dominant position and calls for the introduction of a church tax, removal of religious instruction from schools, separation of the state from the church and limiting the interference of church authorities into politics. The sexual misconduct of several Polish priests has also become an issue.

Source: Statistical data *from Evalue. European values in education*, https://www.atlasofeuropeanvalues.eu/. Country information from project partners: Katarzyna Górak-Sosnowska, Jekatyerina Dunajeva, Heidi Maiberg, Michal Rigel, Elo Süld, Radek Vorlíček.

What is important, many of these sensitive issues are interlinked and can be framed around some core opposing concepts such as traditional/religious vs. liberal, open/inclusive vs. closed/exclusive, Western/global vs. national. At the same time these topics are not as mutually exclusive as one could think what makes the underlying debate even more complicated.

How does it look like in your country?

Think and research what teaching sensitive subjects looks like in your country. We have listed several useful questions that will show the context. They may also be helpful in searching for further inspiration when preparing to teach sensitive topics to pupils and students.

Here are the **questions to reflect** (reflective teaching approach) on:
- What are sensitive topics defined?
- What are sensitive topics specific to your country?
- What sensitive topics specific to your country are worth considering in the process of education?
- Who develops and publishes materials about sensitive topics in your country?
- What sensitive topics are discussed within the curricula of secondary schools and universities?
- Where can you find knowledge to prepare yourself to discuss sensitive topics in your native language?
- What can be helpful when preparing to discuss sensitive topics?
- What are the problems, barriers, and limitations connected with addressing sensitive topics?
- As an educator working with adolescents, what expectations do you have regarding the availability of resources and work methods about sensitive topics?

Follow the six steps of mind map-making process:
- Define the main subject of the mind map (sensitive topic…).
- Add the main branches growing out from the main topic of your mind map.
- Then add key words, associations connected with the main subject.
- Make sure you keep the hierarchy of key words in your mind map.
- Think about how you can "boost" your mind map: add colours, fonts in different size and thickness for the particular key words.
- Think about symbols, images, drawings etc. you can add to your map.

Source: The Ultimate Book of Mind Maps – Tony Buzan.

Another tool that can help you to discern resources, needs, challenges and areas of support is the **SWOT Analysis**. The table below is divided into four parts. In those parts, write four key words (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities in the environment, threats in the environment), which will be crucial in the analysis of your situation related to the teaching of sensitive topics with your pupils.

Think about the strengths of the project, i.e. your potential (knowledge, skills, competences), materials and access to diverse sources of knowledge, working methods and strategies, and what you as a teacher are best at (what do you do well and very well in education).

Reflect on the weak points of this project, i.e. what might be difficult, disadvantageous, problematic for you. Think about what you should avoid, what is missing or what could be risky (e.g. working method). Think about the chances of success of the project at your school or university. What positive results do you see from your activities? How can your activities support the school in implementation of the non-discriminatory education based on humanistic values? Think about the risks, difficulties, and obstacles you might encounter while teaching a sensitive topic in your environment. Apart from the benefits, what may be the disadvantages or difficult situations the pupils or students may experience as a result of participating in a class on a sensitive topic?

Write down your thoughts in the appropriate parts of the table and look at the results. SWOT analysis can be used whenever you want to take a holistic view of the situation in which you will be teaching sensitive topics. It is also a helpful method for motivation and planning.

TIPS

The task above can be completed using with a mind map. It will help you grasp the sense of what sensitive topics are and see the comprehensive image in the context of teaching in your country.

TASK
Write down your thoughts in the prepared spaces.
Once finished, look at the results and plan your teaching steps.

Strengths	Weaknesses

Opportunities in the environment	Threats in the environment

Source: _Mind Tools: SWOT Analysis_

Teaching paradigms, approaches, and strategies

For various reasons, some teachers may use avoidance strategies when teaching about sensitive issues. However, it is worth to take up the challenge and consciously participate in the process of sensitising young people to sensitive topics, while considering the intellectual, behavioural, social and cultural needs of the students.

Remember that with the right preparation (including your own research, a reflective teacher approach, learner-centred pedagogy[16] and human rights pedagogy (HRP)[17], you can and will create a safe space for students during lessons to respectfully communicate, engage in dialogue and discussion about sensitive topics. There is no other way to prepare young people for critical thinking and informed, responsible living in the world than to practice with them through reflective discussion of difficult topics. Listening to and learning about different points of view also provides an authentic opportunity to develop students' critical thinking skills. Therefore, it is necessary to integrate what you teach with the way and methods you teach it.

Every teaching strategy supporting a productive discussion in a classroom plays an important role in building an inclusive atmosphere. It is crucial to make all students feel safe, included, seen, heard, and encouraged to cooperate (group work with a teacher as well as based on learning from and among peers). In this context, cultivating curiosity about the topic and the resources discussed, a clear message about the aim of the classes and equality of all the participants of the process in acquiring knowledge (e.g. "we are all learning here") are important.

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[16] K.M. Klipfel, D. Brecher Cook, Learner-centred Pedagogy, Facet Publishig 2017; Schweisfurth, M. (2013). Learner-Centered Education in International Perspective. Journal of International and Comparative Education, 2 (1), 1-7.

[17] "The way and methodology of 'how' to teach, train and learn in, through and for human rights" A. Mihr, Towards a Human Rights Pedagogy, p. 2.

Examples of paradigms that can be used to discuss sensitive topics in a classroom

Academic Detachment – a paradigm whose key objective is to make sensitive topics the subject of academic research and analysis. It draws on academic knowledge to analyse information and construct sound argumentation about sensitive topics and attempts to eliminate the fragmented and subjective elements of discussions about them.

Civic Humanism – refers to students' sense of social responsibility and teaching that will support students in preparing to the responsibilities of civic participation and activism.

Human Rights Pedagogy – is a paradigm that refers to the ways and methods of teaching about and through human rights. Knowledge of human rights legislation and its application in pedagogy is crucial for the formation of awareness of equal rights in democratic societies and thus a non-discriminatory view of the situation of people affected by sensitive topics.

Liberation and Emancipatory Pedagogy – in this paradigm the school classroom is seen as a group that contributes its knowledge to the analysis of problems of the social and political world. The idea is to develop a "critical consciousness" among the students. Using their own experiences and knowledge, the students contribute to the topics and problems discussed in class.

For the examples of teaching strategies that can be used to discuss sensitive topics in the classroom, see the Toolbox. Other strategies that may be helpful include:

Empathic strategy[18] – is used in educational situations when working on a problem such as stigmatization or stereotyping of a particular group, community or nation that is negatively perceived in social, historical, and media discourse. It is concerned with the hidden discrimination, marginalization, infantilization of a distant group, which we do not have the opportunity to meet with on a daily basis. This strategy includes the following methods: reversal role play, lists of pros and cons, role play and simulation, relying on oral histories (testimonies, narratives) available through films, documents, archives, online.

Exploratory strategy[19] – is used when a problem related to a sensitive topic is not clearly defined because it is contextually distant from students' everyday experiences and familiar sources of knowledge (e.g. forced child labour, climate change, casteism). This strategy can be used by the teacher to develop inquiry skills based on the analysis of diverse knowledge sources related to many disciplines and different types of information materials (scientific, didactic and media sources, international reports, legislation, analyses, case studies).

Distancing strategy[20] – may be used when the discussed topic is very sensitive as it concerns the group, school, local community where the teacher works or when the class is polarised in terms of worldview and access to information. The distancing strategy is based on exploring and discussing analogies and parallels. It may involve a retrospective approach, i.e. going back in time to a situation or experience, which allows to look at the history of the topic, issue or concern.

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[18] How to Build Empathy and Strengthen Your School Community.

[19] More: Rieman, J. (1996). A field study of exploratory learning strategies. ACM Transactions on Computer-Human Interaction (TOCHI), 3(3), 189-218.

[20] More: Case, K. A., & Hemmings, A. (2005). Distancing strategies: White women preservice teachers and antiracist curriculum. Urban education, 40(6), 606-626.

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Compensatory strategy[21] – is used in situations where students' attitudes are one-sided, based on stereotyped knowledge, labelled or generalised a particular group, community, or nation. Such attitudes do not convey the diverse experiences and facts that enable learning about different aspects related to a particular group, community or nation. This strategy places the teacher in the role of a person who points to and explains contradictions in students' arguments. Here the teacher attempts to demythologise popular, common, schematic views and beliefs by referring to facts and reliable sources of knowledge. In this way the teacher tries to compensate for pupils' lack of knowledge.

[21] More: Kurtz M.M. (2011) Compensatory Strategies. In: Kreutzer J.S., DeLuca J., Caplan B. (eds) Encyclopedia of Clinical Neuropsychology. Springer, New York, NY.

How to ethically teach sensitive topics: several crucial steps

Sensitive topics appear in education both intentionally (curriculum guidelines, teacher's intention) and unintentionally (situation, result of unexpected circumstances, presence of new people at school, etc.). Almost all instructors teach about sensitive topics at some stage in their didactic work because a topic may arise unexpectedly, the situation demands it, or the context regarding the issues being discussed requires it. A sensitive topic might make even the best teacher feel uncomfortable or insecure when exploring it in an unprepared classroom with students due to sarcasm, mockery, disgust, silence, and other strategies of students' resistance towards adults and their peers that they may use.

Our natural defensive reaction (also in teaching) is to avoid sensitive or controversial topics or to treat them globally, superficially, without exposing ourselves to difficult discussions and unexpected situations. In the globalised world, these topics are **crucial for developing students' awareness and sensitivity to the diversity of the planet, people, their views and attitudes**. They are also extremely important as they help to instil in students the attitudes of individual and collective responsibility, and civic-mindedness in everyday life environments that relate directly and indirectly to human rights.

Preparation

Civic, democratic and humanistic education in many European countries today is not about acquiring theoretical knowledge or doing textbook exercises. It is an education based on active learning, participation and involvement in various activities (projects) relating to real problems, situations, and actions. It is increasingly believed that it is the action and not the acquisition of knowledge, understood in terms of acquiring as much information as possible, that is an effective way of shaping students' sensitivity, teaching respect for human rights, shaping civic attitudes and understanding of the principles of social co-existence in a globalised world.

Remember that your students deserve to learn about sensitive topics in an authentic, engaging, and intentionally structured way. For some of them, you may be the first adult to relay on facts and a variety of sources during a discussion of a sensitive topic. While teaching about sensitive topic to a group, provide students with a space to articulate their arguments, listen to and moderate the discussion, ask questions, and reveal other aspects of the topic. Some pupils may not have experience in this area due to lack of space and opportunities to participate in constructive discussions on sensitive topics in the family home or peer group environment. Some of them may only be familiar with superficial or fragmentary arguments, taken out of context, not reflecting the situation that the sensitive topic concerns (e.g. racism, torture, mental illness, child labour, vaccinations, human experiments, genocide, refugees, religion).

Whether the activity you are planning is face-to-face or virtual, each situation requires that you are well prepared and aware of the responsibility and ethics of conducting such activities. Remember not to infantilise the group or treat the students as weak and helpless. Students in high school and college are adults and should not be stuck in a glass bubble of ‚taboo' and thus overprotected from discussing difficult topics. However, whether at school or university, as a teacher you should try to follow certain key rules:

> "Share responsibility for including all voices…
> Listen respectfully…
> Be open to changing your perspective…"[22]

The above quotation reflects the so-called ‚ground rules', or the basic principles of cooperation in the learning process. They enable the creation of a safe space for the exchange of ideas and an atmosphere of mutual respect and shared inquiry based on knowledge. These rules, guidelines, and norms of participation can help to:

- clarify and understand the expectations of the teacher and pupils,
- enhance students' sense of belonging to a group,
- facilitate the pupils' ability to engage productively in collaborative activities among themselves, regardless of their differences.

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[22] Guidelines For Classroom Interactions, Center for Research on learning & Teaching, University of Michigan.

Questions worth answering

During the preparation to the implementation of a given sensitive topic, it is useful to answer the following questions:

- Can and should that sensitive topics be taught in the school where I work? (conditioning, context)
- Do I have adequate knowledge? Am I acquainted with the resources I can use to prepare to the introduce a sensitive topic in class? (resources)
- How, in what ways, and with what methods can I introduce the sensitive topic? (methods)
- How will I deal with sensitive issues in the lesson I want to teach? (ideas, solutions)
- Do I have concerns, doubts, and dilemmas about implementing this topic? (conditioning and seeking solutions, mapping out support networks)
- How do I sensitise students to diverse perspectives when implementing a sensitive topic? (implementation of objectives)
- What do I want to achieve with the pupils when implementing the sensitive topic in class? (implementation of goals, expected outcomes)

The steps below can be modified depending on the time allotted for the topic, size and age of the group, location of the lesson – classroom or location outside the school (e.g. museum, memorial institute, cemetery, library, city space, etc.), and other factors that are crucial for the teaching process. Below you will also find a discussion of the most important steps; consider which of them can be applied without modification and which will have to be modified (e.g. to the classroom context).

Step 1

Being aware of the variety of challenges associated with the diversity of student identities (and their views) as well as the multicontextuality of classroom instruction will be your compass.

Set clear objectives for the activity and rules for cooperation. Make clear that the discussion aims to develop sensitivity and respect for diversity, social justice and respect for opposing viewpoints that do not violate human rights and freedoms, including the right to dignity.

You can start with checking the course syllabus, or the curriculum. **What are their objectives? How is the topic presented? Is there any literature to approach the topic listed?** Then perform a quick check of the accessibility of the sources. While the Internet is full of all kinds of resources, one should be cautious and verify which source is reliable.

Choosing relevant sources:
■ Use Google Scholar or ResearchGate in order to increase the probability that the resources are academic.
■ Select reliable national resources and see how the topic has been presented,
■ Search for educational resources (often developed by NGOs). You might even find a ready-to-use scenario for your class.

If you selected your sources carefully, you can be almost sure that your data is reliable. If not, you can also perform a quick check on the information collected:
■ Who is the author? What do they do? What else have they written? How are they perceived?
■ Is the information written in a neutral way, or does it contain statements that are aimed to provoke emotional reaction?
■ Is it the only narrative about the topic? Are you able to find some other narrative? It can be useful to get an idea of possible divisions within your class.
■ Are the resources, videos, interviews, case studies etc., which I am going to use ethical and transparent (protection of images and sensitive data)?

After answering the questions above, select materials that you think students should review and read before class. Think about preparing students to the discussion in advance. You can do it in multiple ways, for example: assign them materials to analyze and work on, prepare draft questions that they will work on in class, prepare different tasks for different groups of students, prepare questions and ask students to answer them.

Do I discuss a particular sensitive topic in a neutral way?

The underlying issue is whether you should present your own opinion on certain issue or not. This depends to a great extent on you and on the kind of topic. If you are a hijab-wearing teacher discussing Islamophobia with your class, you will most probably not be perceived as neutral, even if you try. If you hear an opinion that is "too extreme" (e.g. „heterosexuals should be deported") then you should react.

Being objective is a challenging task, especially if the topic is controversial and you have your clear viewpoint. Use the following techniques to check if the way you approach a sensitive issue is neutral:

- Would I present the topic in the same manner, if I had known that I have a student in the class who has a different opinion than I have, or who belongs to the group that is concerned with the sensitive topic? (e.g. we discuss organ donation as something good, and there is a student who has just lost his close family member in an accident; organs mean saving someone's life, but they also often mean that someone else – the donor – had to die).

- How would I feel if I had the opposite opinion, and I was participating in the class? This imagining exercise is not so hard as we have clear opinions on many sensitive issues. For example, If I am personally against abortion, and I discuss this topic with my students, how would I feel in this discussion, if I was in fact pro-abortion?

- Am I using emotional or normative statements while discussing the topic with the class (e.g. luckily gays cannot marry in our country)? If you are unsure, or the topic is particularly complicated and challenging, you can also add an extra layer, and say that: "there are some people who claim that it is a good thing that gays cannot marry in our country". This way you will turn the discussion into analysing a viewpoint.

Establish **clear lesson objectives, link them to the curriculum goals, and consider how students can work together** to discuss and debate sensitive topics in class. Make it clear to the pupils that conversation and discussion are very important, as they can reflect on the topic and relate it to the surrounding reality. Moreover, it makes them sensitive to opposing viewpoints and enables them to listen to opposing arguments. In listening and discussing, a sense of security is extremely important. Already at this stage, the behaviour and engagement of the students will largely depend on the atmosphere created in the classroom. Usually, when the learning environment (learning climate) is positive and safe, students are more likely to participate in discussions and to share their experiences, observations, and opinions

Remember that your sense of security is just as important as the students' sense of security in your classroom. Think about how you can manage your classroom well in order to create (try to create) a supportive atmosphere and how to maintain it throughout the lesson. Consider how to make everyone feel responsible for the safety in the classroom. One possibility is to distribute responsibility by involving students in the decision-making process. This can be an inclusive process of students' suggestions to create common rules for lessons about sensitive topics. An inclusive approach in this initial activity will make students realise ownership (of their own rules) and acceptance of what they have co-created as a class community.

It is worth establishing and discussing the rules with pupils and signing a contract with them (it can be prepared on the board, flipchart, pupils can take pictures with their cell phones and have the rules with them). It is advisable to sign the contract with the names of all the people who created and accepted it and add the date of finalising it.

The basic principles of such a contract usually involve:

- listening respectfully, without interrupting,
- not interrupting or disrupting others,
- respecting the views of others (including those who are not present and are the authors of statements, arguments used in discussions)
- avoiding discriminatory and rude statements and raised tone of voice,
- criticising not people but ideas, actions.[23]

Activity
Think about what other principles might be crucial to implementing discu ssions with your students in the classroom. Write them down below.

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Think about which, if any, of the proposed, established, rules might adversely affect the implementation of discussions with your students in the classroom. If you think there might be such rules, write them down below.

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[23] See: The University of Michigan Center for Research on Learning and Teaching six rules in this important step.

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Step 2

Prepare yourself and your students for the discussion. Students should be ready to debate problems and dilemmas related to the chosen topic. They should be prepared in advance both intellectually (in terms of knowledge) and emotionally (safety of all the students in the class). Their preparation should include presentation of developmentally and age-appropriate background information, concepts, and sources for analysis. Students should also be informed whether the activity will take place in the classroom or elsewhere, and whether anyone else will be attending. These instructions and information will help the students to prepare for the discussion and to anchor in predictable settings (place, time, space, and class group).

It is important to provide students with a variety of sources. Moreover, students should pay attention to careful referencing when preparing their own materials (where the data/facts are from, and why they choose this particular source). Small assignments that require each student's individual preparation or participation in group preparation can be helpful in making students feel part of the group working on a particular topic. Furthermore, such small assignments are engaging students in planned lesson activities, including discussion.

Do I know how to conduct classes on a particular sensitive topic in an ethical, non-discriminatory manner?

Depending on the group communication, dynamics, and atmosphere, at certain points during the discussion you might remind the students about the necessity to respect human rights and freedoms, including the right to express an opinion. Obviously, it does not mean interrupting students' work, but reacting to misunderstandings, difficulties in listening respectfully to others' points of view or arguments, or not allowing to speak someone with a point of view different than that of the majority.

What limitations and difficulties with discussing a particular topic can I see?

Awareness of possible difficulties is the first step in handling them. When discussing sensitive issues, difficulties might include:

- Lack of knowledge of students' background (e.g. someone is Jewish and you discuss anti-Semitism) and opinions (e.g. someone holds conservative views and you discuss euthanasia).
- Even if you know your students' background or opinions and have prepared for their reactions, they might defy your expectations (e.g. not every Muslim student has to be religious).
- Some students might remain silent and some tensions might remain unsolved. Some parts of the discussion, after students have expressed their opinions in public, might continue beyond the classroom (e.g. in a class consisting of religious students one person comes out as an atheist).
- Students holding extreme positions on the topic discussed. They might severely impede any discussion (e.g. while discussing national identity someone saying that a true Czech can only be defined by Czech pure blood).

Step 3

Stick to the following methodical triad: **ASK, LISTEN, RESPECT**.[24] It can serve as a didactic tool to create a way of thinking about how a teacher can ask questions, listen to the answers, and respect personal choices in a dialogue. Once you have applied the triad yourself, demand the same from your students. Sensitise them to the value of asking questions, listening to the authors of those questions (including those not present when using the statements of others), and respecting the statements of others.

Try to plan the discussion in such a manner as to balance between dominating it and observing it as a teacher. Your role is to support the students and remind them of the established rules for respectful discussion, the rights of the students, and the rights of others to their own opinions. It may happen that during a lesson an unpredictable issue arises, which may trigger strong emotions and divide the students into opposing groups.

When planning a discussion on a sensitive topic, it is also worth considering the following:

- "identifying a clear purpose,
- establishing ground rules,
- providing a common basis for understanding,
- creating a framework for the discussion that maintains focus and flow,
- including everyone,
- being an active facilitator,
- summarizing discussion and collecting student feedback,
- handling issues that involve the instructor's identity (…)"[25].

Step 4

The next step concerns coping with difficult situations when discussing sensitive topics. We cannot prepare ourselves for all the situations, but we can analyse some didactic strategies that can support us in difficult moments. Start by thinking about the following question:

Do I know how to solve a difficult situation (e.g. conflict) that can arise while discussing a particular sensitive topic?

Think about the strategies, methods, and tools you have at disposal to respond to a difficult situation in a class. Write down your answers on a sheet of paper (you may want to do it in key words), so that you can verify them later or supplement them with the following tips:

- in an emotional situation, try to turn the situation into a learning experience,
- "identify the problem,
- clarify the expectations of the interaction,
- encourage the person to talk – this provides you more understanding of the "real" issues involved and often provides clues for possible solutions,
- reframe the problem so that it is not personal (…),
- make the problem something that you are both working on collaboratively to solve (…)"[26],
- if this is not possible, plan to continue the discussion and inform the students.

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[24] These are also the key principles of effective communication.

[25] Guidelines for Discussing Difficult or High-Stakes Topics, Center for research on Learning & Teaching, University of Michigan.

[26] Dealing with difficult people & difficult situations. Setting the stage for success, Counseling and Psychological Services, The University of Kansas.

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Step 5

Conclusion of the activity is a very important step. It consists of summarizing the discussion, gathering the opinions of students, closing the discussed sensitive topics in a safe way. Bear in mind that this part cannot be limited to 2-3 minutes at the end of the common educational process. While planning the lesson, it is advisable to divide it in such a way that there is enough time for each of the five steps. The summary of the discussion should focus on recapping the main points and aspects of the topic that have been discussed.

Depending on the chosen strategy, either the teacher or the learner(s) identifies the key issues explored, synthesizes the different elements of the discussion, highlighting the outcomes, questions and doubts that remained unanswered. It is also important to identify those issues which for various reasons have not been discussed and to decide together whether the group wants to continue working on them, and if so, to decide together how to do it.

There is a number of methods that enable us to summarise the classes and conduct a short evaluation, i.e. to collect feedback from the participants. In the case of feedback concerning lessons on a sensitive topic, it is worth deciding (on the basis of observations of how the communication went, what the dynamics of work in groups were and what the atmosphere was like during the implementation of certain tasks) either on joint feedback (writing feedback and questions from students on the flipchart), or on individual anonymous summaries of particular participants written on sheets of paper, which they then put into a box located near the exit of the classroom.

If you choose to summarise your lessons individually, it is worth using a technique called "Minute Paper". You will find more about it in the [video 1] and [video 2], examples of "Minute Paper" are available here or here, while information on how to use "Minute Paper" while teaching remotely is available here. An example of a Minute Paper for individual adaptation is provided below.

The Minute Paper

What are the most important things/ issues that you have learned today? Please indicate 3-5.

What questions remain unanswered? Make a note.

Is there anything that remains unclear or incomprehensible to you? Make a note.

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Remember that the students have just one minute to write answers to these three questions. Don't forget to prepare a box where they can anonymously put their answers, so that they feel safe and comfortable. After reading their feedback, you will be able to think about how to address their comments, questions, suggestions and prepare the next sensitive topics activity. Of course, this is information you can refer to in your further teaching activities. Remember that it is not only the students' feedback that is important, but also what you do with this knowledge and how you put it into practice.

What will be the difference in discussing a sensitive topic online compared to a classroom?

Teaching online gives the class different premises. As the students can be visible or not (depending on whether they have their cameras switched on or off), it might be more difficult for the teacher to observe their reactions. At the same time, online environment creates a safer space for discussing sensitive topics, as it forces structure on the discussion with only one person speaking at a time. It can provide more channels of discussion: audio and chat. It also offers tools to make some parts of the discussion anonymous, e.g. during a discussion you can conduct a short anonymous poll asking students for their opinions. You can advise students to contact you privately after discussing a sensitive topic in the class. You can then bring in their voice in the next class – anonymously, if necessarily.

At the beginning of the term, discuss all topics, including the sensitive ones, that will be addressed and inform the students about the available forms of expressing their opinions and enquire about their readiness to discuss particular sensitive topics as well as potential problems.

When considering sensitive topics online, ensure:
- comfortable space and conditions for both the lecturer and the students,
- that the discussion is engaging, non-discriminatory and authentic (concerning real situations, giving pupils the opportunity to solve tasks they may encounter outside the classroom).

The students have to feel safe and be willing to share their voices in discussion (in an oral or written form). It might be useful to decide in advance on the principles of work and write them in a common space envisaged for online work (e.g. e-learning platform such as Padlet).

It is worth to review with students the following principles of academic discussion:
- clear, predetermined objectives and working principles,
- theories and case studies (if possible and adaptable),
- protection of the right to privacy,
- respect for the speaker and discussion participants[27] (listening respectfully, not interrupting, respecting other opinions),
- non-discriminatory and not provocative language (as these are particularly important aspects of ethical discussion, therefore they need to be highlighted at various stages of work with the group),
- respect for the opinion of others (as these are particularly important aspects of ethical discussion, therefore they need to be highlighted at various stages of work with the group),
- criticism of ideas and actions, not of people (as these are particularly important aspects of ethical discussion, therefore they need to be highlighted at various stages of work with the group),
- basing the discussions on thematic academic literature and reliable research,
- In conclusion, referring to the reflection.

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[27] More: Teaching respect for all: implementation guide, UNESCO, 2014.

Activity for your own evaluation

In reflective teaching it is also important to evaluate concluded activities and lessons. Below you will find a suggestion for questions related to your experience of teaching a sensitive topic. You may use this suggestion for self-reflection, or you may modify it as you wish.

> *"We do not learn from experience…*
> *we learn from reflecting on experience."*
> – John Dewey

Questions connected with teaching sensitive topics

Write 3-4 questions connected to teaching sensitive topics in your own context (classroom).

My own questions:

1. ....
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2. ....
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3. ....
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4. ....
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Then, as part of the evaluation, write down your observations

Think about the dilemmas related to teaching sensitive topic in the context of your country and school/university.

Think about **'burning' topics or problems, and difficulties** of teaching it.

Think about the **challenges** and positive aspects of implementing sensitive topics. What do you see as the positive side of such lesson? What results of implementing sensitive topics do you expect in the future?

Final
reflections

As humans, we are "beings of practice". Theoretical knowledge alone is not enough to change the world, action is needed. Sensitive topics evolve changing societies. Therefore, it is necessary to pay attention during teachers' workshops in the CEE to education for the future, i.e. adaptation to new conditions and the formation of skills to abandon what no longer serves and may be incomprehensible. There is no single recipe for how to implement sensitive topics with students in the field of education. It is impossible to foresee all situations that may arise in a group or a class when discussing sensitive issues. Even if the teacher knows how to apply various strategies and teaching methods, there is no guarantee that the methods and strategies that worked well with one group will be equally adaptable to work with another group. In such cases, the teacher's experience, sense of context and flexibility in adapting methods and strategies to the dynamics of working with a group is of great importance. Moreover, discussing sensitive topics should make pupils aware of the multiplicity of ways in which people see, think about, and interpret the same facts. It should also help them see how the mechanisms of prejudice and stereotyping work. It „should help pupils to attain the ability of critical reflection and argument, not to take a position too quickly, to question claims of neutrality, to develop a desire for more information and to be tolerant of uncertainty."[28]

Three priorities

When preparing this publication, we followed three priorities:

- we wanted to create a compendium of knowledge about the contemporary reality of teaching sensitive topics in the context of CEE countries,
- we tried to incorporate issues that are of key importance for teachers working with various groups of young people in various conditions and thus – while preparing to their classes – search for inspiration to change the narration, schematic messages, and capture diverse perspectives in their teaching.
- we proposed recommendations for sources oriented towards sensitive topics, ethics and a non-discriminatory approach in education that could be used during the classes.

If our material turns out to be useful, then we will be able to say that these priorities have been met.

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[28] K. Kello (2016). Sensitive and controversial issues in the classroom: teaching history in a divided society, Teachers and Teaching, 22:1, p. 37.

Other guidelines for teaching sensitive topics

Examples of Guidelines

- [Guidelines for educators on countering intolerance and discrimination against Muslims](#): addressing islamophobia through education
- [Choices Program | Teaching About Controversial Issues: A Resource Guide - Choices Program](#)
- Center for Research on Learning and Teaching, University of Michigan (2011). [Guidelines for discussion of racial conflict and the language of hate, bias, and discrimination](#)
- Center for Research on Learning and Teaching, University of Michigan. (2011). [Guidelines for discussion of racial conflict and the language of hate, bias, and discrimination](#)
- Center for Research on Learning and Teaching, University of Michigan. (2011). [Guidelines for discussion of racial conflict and the language of hate, bias, and discrimination](#)
- [Guidelines for Discussing Difficult or High-Stakes Topics | CRLT (umich.edu)](#)
- [Sensitive Topics in the Classroom | Center for Teaching & Learning (berkeley.edu)](#)
- [Managing Difficult Classroom Discussions: Diversity and Inclusion: Teaching Resources: Center for Innovative Teaching and Learning: Indiana University Bloomington](#)
- Clarke P. (2001). [Teaching Controversial Issues: a four step classroom strategy](#)
- [Reflecting on Sensitive Topics - Colorado College](#)
- [About Howard County Public School System – HCPSS](#)
- [TipsControversialIssues.pdf (unc.edu)](#)
- [Managing Difficult or Uncomfortable Topics | Center for Teaching and Learning | Georgia Institute of Technology | Atlanta, GA (gatech.edu)](#)
- [Strategies for Teaching Sensitive Issues in the Secondary Social Studies Classroom (pgcps.org)](#)
- [Teaching Controversial Issues – Guide](#) (2013), Association for Citizenship Teaching

Examples of educational programs, without a regional context

- Oxfam, [Teaching Controversial Issues: A guide for teachers (openrepository.com)](#) [Teaching Controversial Issues (openrepository.com)](#)
- [TT Difficult Conversations web.pdf (learningforjustice.org)](#)
- Strategies for Engaging with Difficult Topics, Strong Emotions, and Challenging Moments in the Classroom: [strategies.pdf (fullerton.edu)](#)
- How to: [Work with sensitive issues | Encounter Edu](#)
- [Helpful Tips for Covering Sensitive Issues in the Social Studies Classroom (populationeducation.org)](#)
- Citizenship classroom: [controversial-issues.pdf (ubuntu.ie)](#)
- [Managing controversy developing a strategy for handling controversy and teaching controversial issues in schools](#)
- [The Right to Human Rights Education – A compilation of provisions of international and regional instruments dealing with human rights education](#)
- [Education Pack: All Different, All Equal](#)

Further reading (examples)

In English

- Adichie, Ch.N. (2009), [The danger of a single story](#), TED.
- Brookfield, S. D., & Preskill, S. (2012). Discussion as a Way of Teaching: Tools and Techniques for Democratic Classrooms. Wiley.
- Cabello B., Burstein N.D. (2012) Examining Teachers' Beliefs About Teaching in Culturally Diverse Classroom, Journal of Teacher Education, 46(4), pp. 285–1294.
- Clarke P., (1992). Teaching controversial issues, w: Education for Planet Earth. Green Teacher 31, Nowy Jork: Niagara Falls, pp. 9–12.
- Cless, J. D., & Goff, B. S. N. (2017). Teaching trauma: A model for introducing traumatic materials in the classroom. Advances in social work, 18(1), 25–138.
- Collins, A. (2013). Teaching Sensitive Topics: Transformative Pedagogy in a Violent Society. Alternation Special Edition, 9, 128–149.
- Coulby D. (2006) Intercultural education: theory and practice. Intercultural education 17.3: 245–257.
- Crosby, D. B. (2012). Meeting the Challenge: Teaching Sensitive Subject Matter. Journal of Effective Teaching, 12(2), 91–104.
- Daane, A. R., Decker, S. R., & Sawtelle, V. (2017). Teaching about racial equity in introductory physics courses. The Physics Teacher, 55(6), 328–333.
- Davies, L. (2017). Justice-sensitive education: The implications of transitional justice mechanisms for teaching and learning. Comparative Education, 53(3), 333–350.
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