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Roundtables on ‘Censorship in History Education’ Address Academic Freedom

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On November 14, CEU will host the first of four roundtables focused on “[Censorship and Self-Censorship in History Education](#)”. The roundtables are organized by Ruben Zeeman, a second-year master’s student from [CEU’s Department of History](#). The four conversations, each based on a case study, will include academics, high-school teachers and textbook publishers addressing a set of global trends: the increasing censorship of historical teaching and the broadening scope of censorship practices. The discussions, which will take place over the next four months, will refer to case studies from the United States, Hungary, Brazil and India. They will also examine a variety of techniques being used to curtail teaching.

Since 2020, Zeeman has been working with the [Network of Concerned Historians](#), an NGO that documents all types of censorship of people who produce history, from academic historians and history teachers to filmmakers of historical documentaries, novelists and other actors involved in the production of historical knowledge. The organization takes particular interest in the intersections between human rights law and history.

[An article](#) by Zeeman, published by the History News Network, was the seed of the roundtable project at CEU, for which he secured funding from Zeit Stiftung. The article highlighted the trends found in the latest [Network of Concerned Historians annual report](#), notably the correlations between attempts to censor the teaching of history and environments

facing challenges to democracy. It was co-written with CEU comparative history PhD student Julia Boechat Machado, who was also involved in the early stages of the roundtable project.

“It is relatively well accepted that academic freedom and freedom of speech are essential parts of a well-working democracy and a critically engaged civil society,” said Zeeman. “That’s what stimulated our interest to look at censorship cases in democratic countries. At the first roundtable, an introduction will be given by former CEU Rector [Michael Ignatieff](#) about CEU's own experiences with limitations imposed on academic freedom in Hungary.

The roundtables aim to bring forth approaches for combating ongoing trends in censorship and to work in transnational cooperation, Zeeman said, noting that pressure toward censorship comes from both legislative actions on the side of the state, as well as from non-state actors, such as stable society groups committed to certain ideals. “To defend academic freedom and freedom of expression also means a willingness to understand other people's positions,” he said.

This week's roundtable will analyze the concerted efforts in a number of Republican-led states against the teaching of race, gender and sexuality in U.S. history under the banner of an anti-Critical Race Theory movement. [Jeremy Young](#), Freedom to Learn Program Director of [PEN America](#), will explore the landscape of “educational gag orders”, educational intimidation laws, book bans and restrictions on higher education autonomy. He will also address the effect such policies have on professors and teachers, including the self-censorship that is jeopardizing the freedom to learn for numerous students.

[Nelva Williamson](#), a history high school teacher from Houston, Texas, with 42 years of teaching experience, will provide insight into one such classroom. She has repeatedly spoken about the importance critical thinking, against book bans and the infringement of her rights to teach African American history. From CEU, [Mathias Moschel](#) will place the backlash against Critical Race Theory into a broader context, looking at its reception in continental Europe and the extent to which critiques from the U.S. have been adjusted to local contexts.

The next roundables in the series will be held at CEU on January 23 and February 20.