

History and Civic Education in Hungary

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Abstract

This paper examines the Hungarian educational system, with primary focus on History and Civic education, mainly through the official regulating documents of the country. The National Core Curriculum and the Framework Curriculum provides a great deal of data towards understanding the position of these subjects, thus a short summary of the contents relevant to History teaching are presented together with the attitude that the country's system holds towards these subjects and their position within the Curriculum. An overview of the state-prescribed themes and notions are presented with emphasis on the different topics Hungarian students are taught in History and Civic Education subjects, while a very short insight into the changes of history teaching in Hungary over the past 30 years is also offered.

Keywords: History teaching, civic education, Hungarian education system, National Curriculum, matura exams

Introduction

Hungary is located in the Carpathian Basin and has a population of approximately 10 million (Eurydice, 2023). Although the country has a recognised population of thirteen ethnic groups, Hungary cannot be described as a multicultural society. Its education system can be placed in the Austro-Prussian-German model, therefore, it also contains several elements of this heritage (e.g. the structure of the school system, the function of external examinations).

The Hungarian education system

Hungary's public education system consists of four different types of schools: kindergarten, elementary, secondary and higher education. The obligatory age for public education is from 3 to 16 (ISCED levels 0-3, *table 1*). Kindergarten starts at the age of

3, elementary school is compulsory from the age of 6 until the age of 14 (grades 1 – 8). Secondary school is 4 years, though it is possible to start secondary school at 5th or 7th grade. There are different types of secondary schools in Hungary, with the most common being the general secondary school providing secondary general education, while a surge in the number of applicants into secondary vocational schools and non-state schools (e.g. religious schools) is also present. Besides general secondary schools, students can also go on to vocational schools or vocational secondary schools, where they can either study a trade alone or study a trade and earn a school leaving certificate as well. These have a different duration from the four years of upper secondary school, but upper secondary school can also take 4-6-8 years.

| Age | School | ISCED level |
|-------|--------------|-------------|
| 3-6 | Kindergarten | 0 |
| 6-14 | Elementary | 1 - 2 |
| 14-18 | Secondary | 3 |

Table 1: Hungarian School system (source: Eurydice 2023)

At the end of secondary education, the school leaving exam is called the matura exam, which is centrally organised by the state while also prescribing the required data and setting the standards for it. It is compulsory to take this exam in 5 subjects, namely, Hungarian Grammar and Literature, Mathematics, History, a foreign language and one additional subject chosen by the student. (Act on Public Education, 2011. 6 §) A number of changes has been implemented by the current government, for instance the lowering of the compulsory age for education, and the inclusion of religious and moral studies into the curriculum (Halász, 2015)

The social function of curriculum

The system is regulated by the National Core Curriculum, a document which includes the general aims of education and the minor objectives of each subject individually. (NCC, 2020.) The first National Core Curriculum was introduced in 1995 (F. Dárdai & Kaposi, 2021). Currently the fifth NCC is in position, which came into force in September 2020. The Curriculum is narrowed down by the framework curriculum into several syllabi

bi in every subject where one can find the list of the materials students might encounter in the matura exam, thus has to be taught. This curriculum describes the compulsory lexical terms at the compulsory school-leaving exam in History. As Nahalka (2021) concludes, there has been a notable increase in state involvement and centralisation efforts in a number of areas, including maintenance, employment, content regulation and control of pedagogical work in recent years.

School maintenance, funding

In public education, local governments were responsible for maintaining public institutions up until 2010. After that, the state has become the largest school provider, as well as a new system of school districts and supervision has been established (Varga, 2022). The government created the Klebelsberg School Maintenance Centre, which has been responsible for the maintenance and organisation of municipal primary and secondary school since 2013. Besides the state, churches, religious associations, minority self-governments, natural persons and organisations or foundations can establish and maintain public schools. (Eurydice, 2023)

The position of History teaching

In Hungary History is a compulsory subject in the school years 5-8 and from 9 to 12 (ISCED levels 2 - 3). It is also part of the obligatory matura exam with an option to take an advanced level exam in it, where there is a larger pool of lexical items (compared to the intermediate¹ level) from which the students can be asked to remember data (Kaposi & Katona, 2023). The National Core Curriculum states that History teaching is mainly based on narrative understanding, meaning that the learner's "historical knowledge is nurtured by studying the stories, descriptions, schemes and interpretations' interaction and how they built upon each other." (NCC, 2020, 345)

The change of teaching approach in Hungary, came years after the change of system in 1989-1990. As Fischer-Dárdai and Kaposi assert, because even though for a time

¹ Despite the name, the intermediate level is the first level. The name comes from the fact that the basic exam was to be the "basic level" to be taken at the age of 16 (see more: Csala Istvánné - Ranschburg Ágnes (2000): A 'Történelem és társadalomismeret' alapműveltségi vizsga történetéhez. *Iskolakultúra*, 9. 36-45.), but in the 1990s this idea was rejected while the name remained.

frontal work or even classroom dictation were the main modes of teaching, the address of challenges teachers faced at the time did not reach Hungary in the 1990's and the analyses of sources played a minor role in History classes. With the implementation of the new matriculation examination in 2005 new kinds of assessment were introduced in the school leaving exam. As a result, "source and activity-centred teaching increased" and new textbooks were also created, while new organisational learning methods like project works started to be used in Hungary, nevertheless, it did not immediately spread throughout the country (F. Dárdai & Kaposi, 2021).

The Framework Curriculum has, for the most part, a chronological way of structuring history, and as such, it deals with several topics in chronological order from both national and world history and it covers the periods from ancient times until modern-day Hungarian history.

Starting from the Ancient period, the students are taught about the ancient civilisations: Greece, Rome, the birth of Christianity and the Islam. All of these are accompanied by a set of subtopics with the lexical items related to the period and development aims. (Framework Curriculum, 2020a,) The world history section for the Medieval times has a more thematic approach than the previous Framework Curriculum had, while retaining the themes of larger empires during that time, but in their own topic (Framework Curriculum, 2020), rather than part of a singular chapter for the Medieval period as in the 2012 Framework Curriculum. The premodern and modern times in world history also appear, with such topics as 'Early capitalism' or 'Enlightenment' with the inclusion of political history among them, and the contemporary world history is also viewed from political and social perspectives. After 2005, the new version of the matura exam lowered the percentage of political history within the subject, although it still holds the dominant position.

The institutions of the European Union and their decision-making processes are also included in the History Framework Curriculum, however, only as a subtopic in national history. The history of other continents is rarely discussed, most of them happen when there is an encounter between European nations and other countries on that continent, e.g. the discovery of America or the colonisation in the 19th century, but individual countries or regions' history do not appear in the Hungarian Framework Curriculum, with the exception of Japan and the Meiji-restoration.

The national history of Hungary takes approximately half of the Framework Curriculum, just as it is stated in the introductory section of the document.

The origin of the Hungarian nation is presented in a detailed manner by listing the linguistic and genetic findings alongside the theories as to who the ancestors of the Hungarians could be. The last historical topic is labelled 'Hungary and the EU', but the final event mentioned in the Framework Curriculum is the Hungarian Constitution of 2012 entering force.

The textbook market currently consists of three types of textbook options, two of them ordered by the Education Authority and one that was created by the Catholic Pedagogical Institution. Although they are different in certain aspects, all of them have to abide by the requirements of the curriculum defined in the Framework Curriculum, meaning that the compulsory data that is listed in the Framework Curriculum has to be included in each textbook, as those items are the ones that are assessed at the matura exam. The validation process of the textbooks is also handled by the Educational Authority (Act CXXV., 2012, 4§). The validated textbooks of the Education Authority are available on the internet for everyone on their website not just in Hungarian, but also in the languages of minorities which are acknowledged in Hungary.²

The Framework Curriculum in History, which gives a detailed account of what students need to learn in History classes and offers ideas about history learning and its goal. The Framework Curriculum, with a large focus on national identity, states that the main goal of history teaching and learning, is that:

Students should become familiar with historical facts, actors, events, stories and processes recognized as the most important by historical science and tradition and become aware of their national belonging. They learn about the most basic elements of the cultural code system that allows one to identify with the core values of our culture. The history curriculum focuses on the history of the Hungarian nation and Hungary. (Framework Curriculum, 2020a, p. 1)

Regarding competencies it declares that "the search for historical information and processing it, source criticism, drawing conclusions and other thinking procedures generally develop learning competences through their mediating effect" (p. 1) It also maintains that in order for the learners to have a "realistic and positive view of the Hungarian nation" they need to familiarize themselves with events from world history and they should be able to see the connection between national and world history events, while they can also take into consideration the history of ethnic minorities' living in Hungary.

² (<https://www.tankonyvkatalogus.hu/>)

Being aware of the history of Hungarians living in the neighbouring state is defined as a “prioritised goal” (p. 4), and with a positive and realistic view on Hungarian history the document says that it could strengthen their ‘feelings of patriotism’. (p. 1)

What is also prioritised - along with communication and orientation in time and locations - is the formation and enhancement of learners’ historical thinking. In connection with historical thinking the Framework Curriculum states that by the end of their studies the students could “organise learnt items in a problem-centred manner”, “form hypotheses about the drivers of the behaviour of historical persons, social groups and institutions”, “compare different, similar historical situations, processes and phenomena” or “recognise that the present is none other but social, economic, political and cultural relations developed as a consequence of past events and factors”.(p. 7.)

The Framework Curriculum in History prescribes the dates, characters, historical notions and topographic items that are to be taught. There are more than 400 concepts listed and more than 470 dates, characters and topographical items in the 2020 Framework Curriculum (Kaposi & Katona, 2023) that students need to be familiar with for the matura exam at the end of secondary school.

There is an option to choose themes in each section and an ‘in-depth’ set lesson can be dedicated to them to have the opportunity to delve into and analyse it in greater detail including different aspects (Framework Curriculum, 2020a). The Framework Curriculum also suggests different kinds of extracurricular/suggested activities for each topic, for example, organising trips to see the remnants of Ancient Roman Architecture for the classes that are studying about the ancient history of the country, or students delivering presentations about historically important figures from the 17th century, or even creating a tableau for all the major investments that happened in the second part of 19th century, which the previous Framework Curriculum did not include.

History examination in Hungary

Hungary is one of the few countries where the matura exam in History is compulsory. Therefore, nearly 70,000 secondary school students take the exam at intermediate or advanced level.³ At both levels, the exam consists of a written part (simple short-answer section and essay section) and an oral part.

³ <https://www.ketszintu.hu/publicstat.php> (2024. 11. 5.)

In the 1990s, the development of the two-tier school-leaving examination system as we know it today involved a review of several foreign examination models (e.g. Scottish, French, German), which have a flexible task selection structure, focusing on the applicability of cognitive ability, applied knowledge, and incorporating other content perspectives in addition to political history (Kaposi, 2020). According to the recommendations of the Pedagogical Institute of Baranya County, for example: *'We would place great emphasis (especially in the written examination) on source recognition, source analysis (...). In both the written and the oral examinations, we would expect candidates to give an indication of their problem-solving thinking (especially at the advanced level)'* (Bernáth & Walz 1992. 39.).

In the second half of the 1990s, the Government Decree 100/97 on the regulations for the matriculation examination was drawn up in two stages, containing the general requirements for the subject (general principles). However, the reform of the school-leaving examination has been delayed for years, partly because of the fact that the alternating political forces sometimes helped and sometimes hindered the work on the development of the examination. During the development process, the philosophy of the examination was influenced by social control, i.e. whether the two-level history examination should be knowledge- or competence-centred (Kaposi, 2020).

As a result of the matura reform in 2005, the size of the Framework Curriculum for the examination has been significantly reduced, the proportion of knowledge on 20th century have increased, the number of lexical items to be studied has decreased, and new topics (such as the status of women) have been introduced into the Framework Curriculum (F. Dárdai & Kaposi, 2020). The topics have become more diverse: they cover not only political history, but also economic history, cultural history, history of mentality and history of life (Kaposi, 2015b). With the introduction of the standardised written exam, the exam has become more uniform and comparable across examination periods compared to the period before 2005.

In a series of mostly closed-ended items, there was a variety of task types with six Hungarian and six universal topics in chronological order, corresponding to the 12 topics of the matura, in a chronological sequence. Because of its structure, it was considered student-friendly, as the content was predictable. A variety of textual sources (textbook, historical work, legal text, scientific article, etc.) and visual sources (pictures, cartoons, maps/map sketches, posters, etc.) were used.

A further change is the introduction of a complex source analysis task in 2017. However, at the intermediate level, although these tasks do indeed consist of several items, from a cognitive point of view, the complex test tasks at the intermediate level do not or rarely measure source analysis, and taxonomically they do not differ from the other tasks, the sources also measuring text comprehension and the application of reproductive knowledge in the first place (Tóth, 2022). A change in content is the inclusion of financial, economic and labour knowledge in the 12th matura test, although this is rarely the case at intermediate level.

There were also changes to the essay tasks: the initial 8 essay topics were reduced to four, for a number of reasons. Out of the 8, three of which had to be completed, subject to the rules of choice. The assessment of the essay tasks is based on competency-based operations and related content elements. Each competency is linked to at least one operation and one content element (Makk & Kófalvi, 2007). The content elements linked to the operations are defined by the task topic and the operations by the competence. By 2012, problem-solving essays were linked to one source at intermediate level and the analytical essays to three sources (Csapodi, 2014). In addition, the period boundaries have been changed, the standard age has been changed and a new, fictitious boundary of 1849 has been added by the test makers. The naming of essays has also changed, with the focus on length the 'problem-solving' essay were now called 'short' and the analytical ones 'long'. In addition to the new designations, short essays refer to a universal topic and the long essays to Hungarian history. The requirement to complete two of the four essays has been changed from 45 to 50 points, with the universal essay always being 'short' and the Hungarian essay always being 'long'.

With the introduction of the 2020 NCC and framework curricula, rethinking of the matura requirements has become relevant, therefore, the next changes have been in practice since 2024 May. Under the new requirements, the scoring of the exam and the number of tasks have not changed in any part of the exam. However, the financial, economic and labour knowledge has been removed from the compulsory topics from 2020 and the twelve matura topics have been modified to seven, therefore the 12 tasks in the first section of the written exam are made up of these seven Hungarian-world topics. It seems that the types of tasks are more varied than in previous years, but there are more complex over-detailing diagrams in the intermediate level tasks and more questions on the interpretation of diagrams, maps and tables.

There was a change in the matura exam requirements in 2021 – due to the newly designed Curriculum and Framework Curriculum in 2020 - that has been in force from the 2024 exam period onwards. A comparison between the previous requirements and the new ones sheds light on how the state lowered the number of obligatory lexical items that could be asked of learners at the intermediate level (from 974 to 848), but significantly increased that amount for the advanced level in History (1223 lexical items in total). Moreover, around 40% of the items were included in the current and the previous two syllabi as well, which implies a more prominent emphasis towards knowledge acquisition (Kaposi & Katona, 2023).

The position of Civic education in Hungary

Civic education was also very active in the early 21st century. This took place due to a paradigm shift, caused by the collapse of authoritarian regimes, globalisation and various ethno-national conflicts and has become a tool of social innovation (Halász, 2005).

Compared to history, civic (or citizenship) education plays a smaller but unique role in the Hungarian education system. It is compulsory in the 8th grade of primary school and in the 12th grade of secondary school, and the subject is integrated with history, so history teachers in Hungary are also responsible for civic education. The National Core Curriculum describes civic education as a subject that “provides pupils with important and useful knowledge about the functioning of the state and its institutions, as well as the economic role of the state and the family” (NCC, 2020, 342). The main aim of its teaching is to provide a foundation for social responsibility, to understand the interrelations between the legal system and everyday life, and to teach and analyse the duality of national and European identity. This subject is optional and can be chosen as a school-leaving examination.

The Framework Curriculum describes the components of civic education as covering a wide range of issues, from the country’s legal system to national identity and environmental issues. Within these topics, students are taught about issues such as the Hungarian Constitution and its main parts, voting rights and social norms. After working on these sub-topics, students should be able to understand the importance of fundamental human rights, while also being aware of their rights and duties as citizens. They are also taught about the different types of elections (parliamentary, municipal, European, referendum), the levels of the legal structure and the basic elements of the tax system, while being

aware of the meaning of concepts such as ‘tax ethics’, ‘sharing public burdens’, ‘source of law’ and who is considered a ‘natural person’ (Framework Curriculum, 2020b, 7).

Democratic values are also part of the curriculum, which aims to create and strengthen a commitment to democracy. It aims not only to foster positive attitudes towards democracy but also to develop a sense of loyalty to the nation. The curriculum states that it “recognises the importance of belonging to the Hungarian people of the world as a national community” and “recognises and values the role of local, regional and national public collections in preserving national cultural heritage” (p. 3). These topics are part of civic education, together with the role of the Hungarian Defence Forces, “understanding the components of national consciousness” and “the relationship between local patriotism and national patriotism” (p. 8). In addition, students will learn about the challenges faced by Hungarian communities in neighbouring countries and how the Hungarian state is committed to supporting these communities to preserve their Hungarian identity.

The incorporation of these patriotic ideals is an indication of how the state views these values and concepts and how it seeks to nurture them; to this end, it is proposed to devote four lessons to this segment of the curriculum.

Civic education also includes other aspects for becoming responsible citizens. Not only democratic values, but also environmental issues are part of the curriculum, where it is explicitly mentioned that teachers should develop and strengthen students’ commitment to protecting our built and natural environment, as well as teach them about consumer rights, financial literacy and skills, including information on how to get a loan, what constitutes a loan contract, banking or financial planning. In all sub-themes, emphasis is placed on digital literacy, given its importance in the 21st century. The importance of “developing digital competences” is repeatedly mentioned among the many objectives of the sub-themes of citizenship education. For example, it is also mentioned in relation to entrepreneurship and environmental issues (Framework Curriculum 2020b).

Dilemmas

The challenges that History teaching in Hungary faces are manifold. Though there is an ongoing process where national history writing and teaching tries to be in sync with the international trends, there are multiple rewriting of History over the past 100 years which has taken its toll on Hungarian History education. (Kaposi, 2020.)

In history teaching, a fundamental issue is the mismatch between the written and the assessed curriculum, which is confirmed by research on history maturation at secondary level (Kojanitz, 2022) as well as empirical research (Tóth, 2024). A common phenomenon is the lack of definition of basic concepts, e.g. source, competence or complex. Therefore, the complex test tasks at the intermediate level do not or rarely assess source analysis⁴, and taxonomically they do not differ from the other tasks (therefore, they are not complex in nature). Moreover, the ‘problem-solving’ and ‘analytical’ tasks - regardless of their names - are mostly knowledge reproduction, which was confirmed by a number of scholars, including József Kaposi and Ágnes F. Dárdai (2006). Thus, contrary to the original intentions, the essay tasks of the school-leaving examination, in the words of László Kojanitz, “(...) *encourage students to reflect on what they have learned as accurately as possible, rather than to think independently. This also gives students the opportunity to write apparently meaningful texts about contexts they only half-understand (...).*” (Kojanitz, 2021, 129.)

Since the matura exam places the strongest impact on both the content and methodological apparatus of secondary school history lessons, these are essentially determined by it, which – in a hidden manner – enhances knowledge reproduction and knowledge-based operations with sources. Therefore, source analysis and critical thinking might rarely be fostered in classes, unless teachers decide to do so. There would be an urgent need for the continuous training of history teachers, a less frequently changing matura exam requirements, and such textbooks that follow the structure of the matura besides the refinement of cognitive apparatus of the exam tasks.

In terms of civic education, the curriculum framework of Hungary places more emphasis on knowledge acquisition whereas the development of civic values also requires the development of attitudes and skills as well, which take years and are essential for active citizenship (Kaposi, 2015a). It has been found that there is a low interest in public affairs (Kaposi, 2020), which may be related to the fact that active democratic decision making in Hungarian schools is not prevalent, Student Council/student self-government (DÖK) is either empty or titular (Jancsák, 2024), and students might pass on the passive decision-making culture they have seen there. On the other hand, it seems that ac-

⁴ Based on: Judit Tóth: A 21. századi készségek-képességek mérése a középszintű történelemérettségi komplex tesztfeladatainak tükrében oral presentation held in 2022, Pécs, Hungary.

tive citizenship is shifting to the online arena⁵, and good initiatives (Jakab, 2022) can be found at university-level as well.

Conclusion

Overall, the Hungarian education system bears the marks of the former German-Prussian system, where primary school lasted 8 years and secondary school 4 years.

Hungary's public education system is centralised, as the state with the use of the National Core Curriculum and Framework Curricula prescribe a great deal of data to be taught to the students, and the state also centrally organises the secondary school leaving exam (matura exam).

History, a compulsory subject at ISCED levels 2-3, holds an important position in this system. In Hungary, the study of history is compulsory for a minimum for a maximum of eight years, which is outstanding at regional and global level, including the compulsory school-leaving examination. Not only is it a compulsory subject, but it is also among the obligatory matura exam subjects. Due to its position in the Curriculum, changes in the subject of History subject attract attention from the general public. In recent years, the new Core Curriculum and Framework Curriculum in 2020 introduced a number of changes (more activity-based lessons), however, it did not solve all the issues that were put forward over the years. Its dependence on factual knowledge over competencies were, to an extent, addressed, but not in a manner that would be deemed sufficient. Since the effect of the implemented changes cannot be fully evaluated, its effect on the lessons are yet to be measured. The changes that came after the introduction of the National Curriculum and the altered school leaving examination system from 2005 onward led to a slow change in the use of teaching methods, that started to deviate from the frontal teaching. New methods, an exam system that has standard elements, the growth in the use of historical sources in everyday classes are examples of positive consequences that have happened in recent years.

Civic education in Hungary covers a wide range of issues that citizens should be aware of, for example, the political and legal system, environmental issues, and banking, while their digital skills and other competences are also enhanced in the process. It is a subject taught to final year students both in elementary and secondary school.

⁵ Based on Mónika Balatoni: Társadalmi aktivitás új formája a fiatalok körében: „a fotelforradalmárok és a médiapolgárok” világa oral presentation held in Debrecen, Hungary (24.10.2024)

Nowadays, just as the Framework Curriculum and the matura exam requirements suggest, students are still obliged to be familiar with a rather large amount of lexical items during their historical studies, and since the topics are for a large extent in chronological order, the system could be considered more conservative in its approach concerning education. A drastic modification in the content canon of any kind is possible only by reaching a common consensus, especially with history, where the content canon is strong (Reisch, 2015).

The representative researchers of Hungarian history didactics (Ágnes F. Dárdai, József Kaposi, László Kojanitz, András Katona) have already outlined the basis for the renewal of history teaching (Kojanitz, 2018): historians and history teachers, while considering the needs of society, must cooperate when defining the goals, teaching methods and strategies of history (and civic) education.

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