

History and civic education in Slovakia

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Abstract

Humanities and civic education in Slovakia is an underemphasized component of general education compared to other educational fields. This state of affairs is due to several factors, namely international and national testing and pressure on so-called employability, while the values and attitudes of future citizens are rather ignored. The consequences of the undervaluing of humanities education are felt in society in the high level of distrust in the system and the power of science, the questioning of the basic values of the democratic system and the tendencies towards populism and authoritarianism.

The situation should be changed by the complex reform and introduction of the new curriculum, which is currently being introduced in the first schools. The new curriculum introduces an up to date narrative in History teaching within the educational field People and Society aimed at active citizenship opened to European and global issues.

This paper aims to present the history of the Slovak education system, the place of history and civics in it, current challenges and problems that need to be addressed in adapting the education system to the needs of the 21st century.

Keywords: Slovak education system, history teaching, civics, curriculum reform

Introduction

Slovakia is a country in Central Europe, bordered by the Czech Republic, Poland, Ukraine, Hungary and Austria. The population of the country is approximately 5.5 million.

Slovakia has been an independent state since 1993 when it separated from Czechoslovakia. The distribution of population is higher in the south-west in and near the capital Bratislava and the second largest city in the eastern region Košice, the rest of the country is rather rural. Slovakia is ethnically diverse with the largest minority of Hungarians living along the southern border with Hungary, the Ruthenians living at the border

with Ukraine and the Roma living in numerous communities in eastern and central areas. The system offers education in the languages of the minorities as well.

Historical roots of the education system

The school system in Czechoslovakia was built on the previous Austro-Hungarian tradition and reflected the ethnic structure of society. During the Second World War, Czechia was occupied by the Third Reich and Slovakia declared a state under the influence and control of Nazi Germany. Its school system was built on the principles of national socialism. After the liberation, Czechoslovakia was restored and after a short period of democracy, the Communist Party came to power in a coup d'état in February 1948, introducing a one-party system of government and a strong ideologisation of the whole of society, including education. On the one hand, education was supposed to be open to all, regardless of social status and gender, but on the other hand, access to higher education became a means of manipulation. The intention was equality between regions and genders, but access to quality and especially higher education became an object of reward for political loyalty and conformity. After the fall of communism, the education system has made several reform efforts to come to terms with the legacy of two totalitarian regimes and to transform itself into education for the 21st century, but it is constantly struggling with a lack of interest from political leaders and systematic underfunding. In 2023, the latest comprehensive reform of primary school education began its pilot year to achieve the necessary changes in a long-term process planned until 2035.

The Slovak education system

There are more than 2,500 schools in the Slovak education system. Over 90% of these schools are publicly funded and locally maintained. About 5.5% primary schools are religious and 4.5% are private. The Slovak public school system has 266,000 pupils in preschool (3,137 kindergartens for early childhood education and care), 2,069 primary and lower secondary schools with approximately 282,500 pupils, and 670 schools and 200,000 pupils in upper secondary school. The school system employs over 117,700 teachers. The whole system is coeducational. Approximately 10% of students attend pri-

vate and church schools. They can be based on denomination - the majority is Catholic, the minority is evangelical and of reformed churches. There are 459 state schools for children with special educational needs, with over 13,500 additional pupils attending these institutions, and many Roma children from marginalized Roma communities attend these institutions. There is an ongoing discussion about the need for inclusion.

'Bilingual' schools with teaching in Slovak and one foreign language (mainly English, also German and Spanish, Russian and French) are popular institutions in the country.

Typical phenomena in the rural areas are small multi-grade schools with less than 50 pupils. There are 500 in total, which makes it 20% of all primary schools and they educate about 4% of the pupils. There is an ongoing discussion on streamlining their funding and merging.

The municipality shall designate school districts for individual elementary schools by general binding ordinance. In Slovakia the catchment areas are defined by local authorities, but parents have the right for their own school choice. Administrative control over education is obtained by the Minister of Education, Research, Development and Youth of the Slovak Republic appointed by the president. This person is nominated by the governing political party (currently: Tomáš Drucker, Hlas - Social Democracy). The ministry manages several agencies - National Institute of Education and Youth responsible for formal, informal education, teacher training, national testing and Pedagogical Library; Research Institute of Child Psychology and Patopsychology, Slovak Centre of Scientific and Technical Information etc. Another important body is the State School Inspection supervising education through school visits and observation (OECD, 2015; OECD, 2021).

Compulsory education starts at the age of six (ISCED 0) and it follows compulsory attendance in the last year of kindergarten. Primary education lasts 9 years, compulsory education lasts 10 years. Broad general education is for children aged 6 - 15: primary from (ISCED1) 6 – 10 years and lower secondary lasts (ISCED2) between 11 – 15 years. The 9-year primary education continues with upper-secondary education at various types of schools to complete 10 years of compulsory education. In Slovakia it is common to organise entrance examinations or combine their results with the results of nationwide Testing 9 in spring of the last year.

Upper secondary school is a four-year course (ISCED 3) for 15–18-year-olds. Its aim is to prepare young people for further education, higher education (ISCED 6-8) and the demands of the labour market and individual specialization. Further education colleg-

es (ISCED 3) also offer three-year vocational education and training opportunities for students to pursue vocational studies and higher education (ISCED 5- 8). Alternative schools have become more and more popular as well as homeschooling - especially after the Covid pandemic. (OECD, 2015; OECD, 2021). Within the age range of 20-64, 75% of the majority population achieved secondary education as the highest level of education. Among the Roma population, this share is only 18%. (EACEA)

School maintenance, funding

The governance of the school system

School governance is fairly decentralised and involves three levels of administration: the central government, regions and municipalities. While the central government retains the key regulatory role the provision of public education services is mostly the responsibility of regions and municipalities.

An important regulatory role for the central government

The government and the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sports lately renamed to the Ministry of Education, Research, Development and Youth of the Slovak Republic are responsible for national education policy and the overall strategy for the education system. The responsibilities of the Ministry include the supervision and development of the education system, establishing curriculum, the framework for student learning objectives (through National Education Programmes), defining the levels and terms of funding, setting the requirements for the professional and pedagogical competence of educational staff, determining salaries of teachers and managing the register of schools and school facilities which are part of the school network. The Ministry of Interior is also formally part of the administration of the funding to schools. In 2013, the management of education departments of regional state authorities (which mainly administer special schools), shifted from the Ministry of Education to the Ministry of Interior. Since then, all schools except those established by self-governing regions are financed from the budget chapter of the Ministry of Interior. However, the Ministry of Education is in charge of education budget negotiations and determines the terms for the funding of individual schools. The Ministry of Interior acts as an intermediary regarding the cash flow from the state budget to schools and provides mainly back office services for the Ministry of Education. (OECD, 2015)

Another significant stakeholder at the national level is the Slovak State Schools Inspectorate (ŠŠI) responsible for monitoring schools and school facilities and checking the conditions and results of the education they provide, the quality of their management, the efficiency of their use of resources and their compliance with binding regulations. The Inspectorate can also recommend the closure of schools or school facilities.

The Ministry is assisted in its work by a range of national-level agencies which are supervised by the Ministry and partially funded from its budget. These include: i) the *Slovak Centre of Scientific and Technical Information* (CVTI) (which was merged with the Institute of Information and Prognoses of Education, UIPŠ), which is the national information centre for science, technology, innovation and education (collecting and processing information on education); ii) the *National Institute of Vocational Education* (ŠIOV), which is responsible for work which informs policy development in secondary vocational education, including the development of educational programmes and methodological advice to vocational schools; iii) the *National Institute of Education and Youth* (NIVAM) which merged four former institutes and their responsibilities: the National Institute for Certified Educational Measurements (NÚCEM), which takes responsibility for the common (or state) part of the school-leaving examination (Maturita), organises national student assessments (in Years 5 and 9), and manages international student assessments; the *National Institute of Education* (ŠPÚ), which develops work to inform policy development in basic and general upper secondary education including the content of educational programmes and methodological advice to schools; the *Methodology and Pedagogy Centre* (MPC), which organises and implements professional development and in-service training courses for teaching and non-teaching staff, and the *Pedagogical Library*. NIVAM has eight regional centres in each self-governing region. The Curriculum Council is an advisory body to the Minister of Education and consists of experts from academia, organisations representing kindergartens, primary schools, secondary schools and educational establishments, experts working in the field of education and training in the Slovak Republic or abroad. The Curriculum Council is an expert, initiating and advisory body to the Minister in key areas of education and training, especially in the field of innovation of the content of education and training; reforms of the content, forms and conditions of education and, in particular, its task is to facilitate the continuity, systematic, participatory processes of change and development in the Department of Education.

A decentralised provision of education services

As part of their transferred competences in education, self-governing regions establish and close upper secondary schools and apprenticeship training centres. As part of their original competences, self-governing regions establish and close primary schools of art, language schools (other than language schools associated with basic schools), school facilities (e.g. free time centres, school farms and apprenticeship training centres, school dormitories) and school special-purpose facilities (e.g. school catering facilities, school service centres). As part of their transferred competences in school education, municipalities establish and close basic schools, covering both primary and lower secondary education. As part of their original competences, municipalities establish and close pre-primary schools, primary schools of art, language schools associated with basic schools, school facilities (e.g. school clubs for children, free time centres, school dormitories) and school special-purpose facilities (e.g. school catering facilities, school service centres). Education departments of regional state authorities are the founders of special schools (at all levels) as well as of some school facilities (e.g. dormitories, catering facilities). They also cooperate with school self-governing authorities and private school founders by providing guidance regarding the funding and organisation of schools and offering methodological guidance (e.g. training). In addition, they also manage professional advisory services which are provided to all schools in the respective region. The remaining providers are the church and other private providers. They receive public funding on a similar basis to state schools and benefit from considerable autonomy in managing their schools. In terms of funding, in basic and upper secondary education, founders serve as the link between the central level and schools. Founders distribute funds they receive from the Ministry to individual schools and are allowed to reallocate a certain amount among their schools.

Social function and curriculum of the Slovak school system

The current curriculum - the Innovated National Education Programme (iNEP) has been in force since 2015. It is merely an updated NEP introduced in September 2008 as the first two-level curriculum in the Slovak Republic. Beforehand there were thematic plans binding for each subject and grade.

The lack of inclusion is significant especially regarding marginalised communities of Roma people who have been living in generational poverty for many decades. (EA-CEA). The Slovak education system has currently started a structural reform where inclusion is one of the most important starting points and pillars of the process of change.

Historical roots of the Slovak education system

The establishment of the multinational absolutist Austro-Hungarian state in the 18th century led to the first general reform of schools on the initiative of the state, in which all levels of schools were reformed according to the Ratio Educationis (1777), establishing a relatively unified school system. According to this general order, three grades of elementary schools were established: *Trivial* - one- or two-class schools for the children of the rural and urban poor. The content of instruction was reading, writing, arithmetic, the rudiments of agriculture and religion. *Main school* was a three or four class school for each county to prepare pupils for further study. *Normal schools* were set up in the county towns.

The Latin schools were divided into three stages: grammatical, humanistic and philosophical. Instead of the two Jesuit universities, academies remained in Slovakia (Bratislava and Košice), which, like lyceums, provided the foundations for higher philosophical, theological and legal studies. In the Theresian period, higher vocational schools were also established to train specialists for new economic sectors and state administration - the Mining and Forestry Academy in Banská Štiavnica and the Collegium oeconomicum in Senec.

Although the state began to interfere in the educational system, the Catholic Church defended its monopoly in this area. The Protestant Church also maintained its system of education.

Joseph II divided the schools into folk and Latin schools; these were subdivided into grades and types of schools according to the social structure of the time. He made school attendance compulsory from 6 to 12 years of age, took an annual census of children, declared education free, and punished absence from school. These changes also affected secondary schools. The favourable development of education in Hungary was hampered by the bourgeois revolution in France.

The Ratio Educationis of 1806 (Schulkodex) implemented the teaching in Hungarian instead of teaching it as one of the subjects, and the Germanizing tendencies were replaced by Magyarization.

In the 1948 revolution of 1848 the Slovak representatives demanded political autonomy and the education in the Slovak language, but did not succeed. The Sunday schools, libraries and reading rooms remained the only available options of education in mother tongue (Kmeť). One of the leading figures was politician, writer and journalist Ľudovít Štúr (1815-1856), who highly valued education as a condition for political freedom and social justice.

The October Diploma in 1860 allowed the representatives of the Hungarian nobility to make Hungarian a language of instruction. Slovak and German were used only as auxiliary languages. In this period, a more intense Magyarization of education began.

In 1861, The Memorandum of the Slovak Nation expressed the dissatisfaction of the Slovaks with the regulations in education and public life. It demanded that the Slovak language be recognized as the language of public schools and other school activities. After the failure of the memorandum, the Slovak intelligentsia transferred its activity to the cultural sphere. In 1863 the Slovak Matica was founded as a cultural and educational institute. The Slovaks tried to preserve the Slovak language in some of the older grammar schools, and from their own funds they established three Slovak grammar schools in Revúca (1862), Martin (1867) and Kláštor pod Znievom (1869).

All Slovak grammar schools and Matica were closed in 1875, a few years after the monarchy was divided in Austrian and Hungarian parts where education became a separate agenda of respective ministries. Under the Apponyi's Laws (1907) the teaching in Slovak schools was fully magyarised. Until the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, education in Slovak practically did not exist.

The development and evolution of the education system in the 20th century was influenced by major political events of the era. After the establishment of the First Czechoslovak Republic, conditions in Slovak education improved. The creation of the Slovak education system within Czechoslovakia became one of the fundamental tasks of the newly created country, elementary, secondary education and universities were founded. As a result of strong Magyarization at this time, there was a lack of Slovak teachers for the folk schools and secondary school professors in Slovakia, and the representatives of the state power in Slovakia asked for help from Czech teachers and

professors. The idea of Czechoslovakism was to create a Czechoslovak nation in a political sense. The Small School Act (1922) regulated education throughout compulsory school attendance extended to 8 years (6-14), previously it was 6 years in Hungary and 8 years in Austria. Comenius University was established in Bratislava in 1919,

The political changes after the Munich Agreement led to the declaration of autonomy of Slovakia in March 1939 which became a German satellite and all Czech teachers had to leave its territory. Education began to adapt to the new political reality and a Slovak version of national-socialist ideology. The teacher was to be a nationally and Christianly conscious prototype supporting the regime, a pillar of the national-socialist education and was obliged to participate in all religious activities (Kudláčová). Towards the end of the war 1944 all teachers and school staff became civil servants. The Jewish children and students were deprived of the right to education. Slovak language purism was introduced and required. The youth was organised in Hlinka's Youth (Hlinkova mládež). On the other hand, the Comenius University in Bratislava was renamed to Slovak University, Vysoká škola technická M. R. Štefánika was relocated from Košice - then occupied by Hungary - to Bratislava. Two new universities were established - technology at Vysoká škola technická and economy at Vysoká škola obchodná in Bratislava (1940).

After World War II Czechoslovakia returned to a democratic system of government. However, the power in Czechoslovakia was taken over by the Communist Coup in February 1948. In the period of socialism, the whole life of the society was affected by the Marxist-Leninist ideology. The system of education was unified, the church and private schools banned. The state created a monopoly for education with a pro-Soviet orientation which was to be transferred to the educational process. The youth played a key role in the communist ideology, and the teachers became an instrument of state ideology and their aim was to change the mentality of the people, to form "new socialist men", "nationally and politically conscious citizens of the people's democratic state, brave defenders of the homeland and devoted supporters of the working people and socialism" (Dendys, 128). Teachers were under the scrutiny of the competent and it was their duty to constantly improve in fulfilling their mission, which was "the ideological and political education of the youth". The state also asserted its power through the annual deployment of teachers - teacher transfers as punishment. Moreover, restrictions on access to especially higher education was one of the tools of the regime's pressure.

After 1989 and 1993

Social and political changes after the Velvet revolution included major changes in the system of education including legal terms, financial support, autonomy of the teachers, content. Shortly after the political changes and the fall of socialism, the state curriculum was innovated as a temporary document. On the top of that, private and church schools were reintroduced and new universities were established. In May 1990, the universities became autonomous institutions and gained academic freedom. New approaches and new concepts of education evolved.

The first conceptual attempt to reform the education system, the *Spirit of the School* in 1991 sought to define new educational goals and how to realize them. In 1993 Czechoslovakia was dissolved and Slovakia established. The next attempt for reform was made in August 1994 with the *Project Constantine - The National Programme for Education*, which represented the first concept of a comprehensive reform. However, this attempt was unsuccessful because in December 1994 there was a change in the leadership of the Ministry of Education. After another change of Minister of Education in 1998, the issue of comprehensive reform reappeared. At that time, the Ministry of Education set up a commission to draw up a *Concept for the Development of Education and Training in the Slovak Republic* with an overview for the next 15-20 years. The result was the *Millennium Project* promoted to a binding reform document, although it was neither professionally nor conceptually completed and its concrete reform strategy was never implemented.

In 2008 a two-level curriculum was introduced and the schools were bound to create school curricula as their concretization of the state curriculum. A brand new element in the Slovak context was introduced in the form of performance standards (specific learning requirements) related to content standards. The aim was the transformation to a competence curriculum based on Bloom taxonomy. Two level curriculum was meant to give schools and teachers more autonomy. However, due to the lack of time and preparation of the teachers and school management, the school curriculum often ended as a copy-paste document and not much changed in teaching practices.

In 2015, the Innovated NEP was introduced, which was essentially a NEP with minor changes. The new curriculum was created in 2023 at the participatory level with broad cooperation of ministry agencies, academia, teachers and NGOs. The “new curriculum”

is already in practice at 39 pilot schools that started a deep and long-term transformation of the education system.

Teacher training at universities is discussed continuously (Vajda). There are 35 universities and colleges in Slovakia today, eight faculties offer the study of history in their respective departments, all of them with History didactics.

National education system

School governance in the Slovak Republic is fairly decentralised and involves three levels of administration: the central government, regions and municipalities. While the central government retains the key regulatory role, the provision of public education services is mostly the responsibility of regions (upper secondary education) and municipalities (pre-primary and basic education). The large majority of children attend state schools, although Church and other private providers receive public funding on a similar basis to state schools. The content of instruction in the Slovak Republic is established at two levels. At the national level, the Ministry issues National Education Programmes (NEPs). Schools further develop School Education Programmes, which consist of the operationalisation of NEPs to fit the context of individual schools. The Slovak Republic has a mixed set of outcomes. Performance in international assessments indicates some improvement in reading at the primary level but some significant and growing challenges at the secondary level. There are also concerns about strong social selectivity and inequities in the education system, including misplacement of some students in special schools (OECD, 2015).

While the central government retains the key regulatory role in terms of the NEP, economic provision of public education services is mostly the responsibility of regions and municipalities.

The 2008 School Act defines the objectives of the education system as:

- Gaining a range of competencies (e.g. communication skills, mathematical literacy, social and civic competencies).
- Gaining English language proficiency and in at least another foreign language.
- Learning how to identify, analyse and solve problems.
- Preparing for a responsible life in a free society in the spirit of mutual understanding and tolerance; learning how to develop personally, engaging in lifelong learning, working in a team and taking responsibility.

Since 2008, a two-tier curriculum has been introduced in Slovakia, which gives schools more freedom in planning their locally implemented curriculum. At the same time, nationwide testing of grades 5 (cancelled in 2023) and 9 (named after the grades) has been introduced. Relative performance tests (norm-referenced) are being developed for Testing 5. These differentiate pupils according to their performance on the test, so that pupils' results can be compared with each other. (NÚCEM)

The aim of Testing 9 is to compare and differentiate pupils' performance in the Slovak language and maths and to provide feedback to schools on their level compared to other schools in Slovakia based on pupils' results. Under the Education Act as amended, secondary schools also admit pupils on the basis of the results of external Testing 9 therefore elementary schools invest most time in 9th grade to prepare pupils in Slovak language and maths and place less emphasis on other subjects.

Since 2005, the external part and the written form of the internal part of the matriculation examination in foreign languages and mathematics and, since 2007, in languages of instruction (Slovak language and literature, Slovak language and literature, Hungarian language and literature, Ukrainian language and literature) have been conducted.

In 2008, the National Institute of Certified Measurements of Education (NÚCEM) was established, which took over all tasks related to the preparation and implementation of the external and internal matriculation. At the same time, in 2018, the NÚCEM launched a testing model of online matriculation in selected schools.

Position of History education in Slovakia

History as a school subject was introduced relatively late. The history of antiquity used to be part of the teaching of ancient languages. Ratio Educationis (1777) introduced the history of Hungary as a multiethnic country. All the pupils were to know History of the Old and New Testament, history and geography of Hungary. The 1806 modification of Ratio Educationis also emphasised moral education within history.

In the second half of the 19th century History didactics evolved together with History lesson plans, textbooks, time frame of 2 - 4 lessons a week. History as a school subject was in the interest of a state as a preparation of future citizens. Towards the end of the 19th century a Hungarian nationalistic narrative prevailed in History teaching. Some textbooks were translated to the languages of minorities.

In the newly established Czechoslovakia, school history was supposed to be a cementing element for the Czechoslovak nation and educate patriotism. The content was mainly Czech history with some comments on the past of the Slovaks and the textbooks were translated and adopted in Slovak (nationalised). The narrative traced the common history of Czechs and Slovaks such as the Great Moravia and the Hussite movement, National revival, regional history and historical monuments etc. The teachers for basic schools were prepared at teacher academies and the teachers for high schools at universities (Kmeť, p. 75).

During World War II the education was subject to national-socialist ideology with three pillars: Christian worldview, trade union solidarity, and nationalism. The content was deprived of Hungarian and Czech elements, the Slovak state was interpreted as a result of thousands of years of effort to gain national independence and became the protector of Christian and national community, bonds with German history were emphasised e.g. Great Moravia - Frankish empire, German colonisation in the Middle Ages (Kmeť, p.76).

After World War II Czechoslovakia was renewed and education proclaimed progressive traditions of Czech and Slovak nations, their relationships in history, the principles of people's democracy and Slavic reciprocity. Already in 1947, the new curriculum enhanced Marxist historiography and in terms of content emphasised Hussite revolutionary movement, history of workers movement, interconnections with the history of the Soviet Union. Even the Middle Ages were interpreted in the sense of class struggles.

In socialist Czechoslovakia the main emphasis was on the contribution of peoples to the progress of mankind, real socialism and socialist countries in Cuba, Asia and Africa, scientific approach to history and scientific atheism. The Ministry of Education of the Slovak socialist republic issued comprehensive publications on the function of history in the system of communist education. (Kmeť, p. 80) History was ideologized and politicised. History textbooks were not age appropriate, but social-politically schematic, with an overload of factography and ideological postulates, graphically and aesthetically on a low level. Innovative and experimental approaches were typical for the Czech part of Czechoslovakia. History was divided into world history and national history.

After 1989

Social and political changes after the Velvet revolution also included major changes in the system of education. The history didactics absorbed current trends. Temporary curricula covered traditional topics and main eras with emphasis on competences, democratic values, humanism, and tolerance.

The first support for history teaching were temporary interpretative texts for modern history. It took some time to prepare modern History textbooks, the set for primary schools had been published since 1994, but high schools received the first textbook a decade later. Between 1994 - 2006 an almost complete set of synthetic-analytical type of history textbooks with workbooks and reading-books was introduced to basic schools. Since School Act 2008, history as a school subject has belonged to the educational field of 'People and Society' together with geography and civic education. This integrated structure applies to the lower secondary level (10–15) and upper secondary level (15–19).

The low importance of humanities education is also reflected in the proportion of teaching time in the framework curriculum. Negative change in history education in 2008 was the radical reduction of history lessons from two to one per week at elementary schools except the last grade. As a result, the curriculum was reduced and the greatest emphasis was placed on national history. As a consequence, a new set of textbooks was produced, for 5th - 7th grade by Slovenské pedagogické nakladateľstvo and a team of historians with strong inclination to the Slovak state and nationalism. This set of textbooks is highly problematic in many ways, it is not conceptual, it is single-mindedly focused on Slovak history and does not respect scientific arguments (e.g. mentions statements such as *"Therefore, we can consider Svätopluk a king."* or presents a ban on divorces in the Middle Ages twice in the same paragraph.) Matica Slovenská published a textbook for 8th grade with the same characteristics as the previous ones. The textbook on the 20th Century in 9th grade was prepared by Orbis Pictus - the same publisher that issued the set of analytic-synthetic textbooks in the 1990s.

The textbooks for high schools were finished only a decade later by the same team that created 5th - 7th grade textbooks of basic schools. First there were two books for each grade - one for national, another one for world history, later on they were reduced

and merged into one that applied to both grammar schools and any high school in the system regardless of the number of lessons per week history was allocated. This set is also criticised by both academics and teachers including distorted information on Slovak history. The lack of quality textbooks, educational publications and material is a major phenomenon typical for the Slovak education system and especially History education at all levels.

This lack of quality textbooks is due to the fact that *“the state, through its long-standing strict centralized approval and publication of textbooks, has made it impossible for textbooks to function fully, which has a very negative impact on teaching which lacks a main medium to help students construct meanings rather than drive learning only to memorize meanings. The implication is obvious. At present, after more than thirty years, pupils in all types of schools have only nine history textbooks, which shows the complete failure of the state in this area and in the way they have been approved, published and generally funded in the context of the past three decades.”* (Kratochvíl b, s.35)

During the period of preparation for new history textbooks, mailings of the teaching texts *Old Nation - Young State* in 1994 and Milan S. Ďurica's encyclopaedic publication *History of Slovakia and Slovaks* in 1996 appeared in schools, giving readers a nationalistic view of Slovak history. The contents of these publications could only cause problems for teachers, who perceived the works of historians as necessarily correct bricks that “fit” into one construction of the image of the past. For most Slovak historians, the sending of the above-mentioned publications was perceived as an attempt to ideologically influence teachers and high school students. It was not until 2000 that the textbook *Dejepis* for the 1st year of grammar schools by Július Bartl, Miroslav Kamenický and Pavel Valachovič appeared, followed two years later by the textbook *Dejepis* for the 2nd year of grammar schools. Textbooks of history (national and world history) for the 3rd year were published only in 2005 (national history) and 2006 (world history). These new sets of textbooks contain not only facts, but also examples of sources with questions and topics to reflect on the events. The content of these textbooks does not fundamentally change the nature of history teaching, which is primarily concerned with the acquisition of lexical knowledge and not with working with sources or competing interpretations. Given their focus, they do not create the space for preparing students to write an argumentative paper either. The alternative approach (i.e. the task of writing an essay) to the final matriculation exam exists only in some bilingual high schools. (Šuch, s. 41)

The NEP describes characteristics of the history subject, and prescribes objectives and outcomes in the form of performance and content standards and themes based on the main historical eras.

“The educational standard consists of the characteristics of the subject and the basic learning objectives, which are specified in the performance standard. It is a coherent system of performances that are expressed in cognitively graded specified objectives - learning requirements. These core requirements can be further specified, concretised and developed by teachers.”

At the same time, this general objective is specified in three target areas. The first was the area of basic knowledge of historical facts and the second was the area of basic abilities, competences or skills to know diverse historical material. The third area included those learning objectives that were related to students’ value orientation and action and, at the same time, to the development of strategies in teachers’ teaching practices (Kratochvíl b, s. 17).

The NEP considers the purpose of history teaching to be national consciousness and core factual information which the Slovak republic, in the form of its legitimate state authorities, consider the spiritual glue for national cohesion. In other words: history is our story, our unique Slovak story, our history as embedded in its European context. We should learn it to know what we are collectively speaking about when we pronounce certain names, dates, places and events from history (Vajda, s. 144).

The content of the first year of history education (5th grade) is propaedeutic and subsequently the history curriculum covers the main historical eras chronologically. In the process of teaching history at primary school, special emphasis is placed on

- the history of the 19th and 20th centuries (iNEP)
- developing, correcting, cultivating and preserving historical consciousness
- understanding and respecting the cultural and other differences of people, different diversified groups and communities
- developing the values of a democratic society.
- the importance attached to the democratic values of European civilization.

Instruction time for social studies is combined with another subject at primary level and is part of the educational field of ‘People and Society’ at lower secondary and upper secondary level together with history, geography and civic education.

History at upper secondary level is compulsory in the course of three years, two lessons a week at grammar schools, one lesson per week for one or two years at other types of high schools.

History is an optional matriculation subject in Slovakia (maturita - Baccalaureate Examination). The aim of the History maturita examination is to determine whether the knowledge, skills and attitudes of students meet the requirements of the educational standards and the curriculum. A further aim is to determine the extent to which history has contributed to the formation and shaping of a critical historical awareness, on the basis of which pupils are to understand the past and present of the country they live in. The aim is to find out how they understand the historical transformations of Europe and the world, and the global problems of human society. The concrete structure of the objectives is formulated in three hierarchical levels from knowledge, understanding, application to analysis, synthesis and assessment in the content of the curriculum. The target requirements for the knowledge and skills are defined by the individual thematic units based on the current curriculum. They are arranged chronologically and structured to emphasise primarily essential historical concepts, phenomena, events and processes rather than individual historical facts and events. This approach draws attention to the internal structure of the learning content, which consists of three basic elements: concepts, generalisations and facts.

In 2023 a new curriculum was approved by the ministry of education. The document *Starting point to the changes in the new curriculum*, however, expresses belief that it is possible to “convey a clear message that socio-humanitarian knowledge should not play second fiddle in today’s technology- and science-oriented world”. The document is part of the comprehensive website *Education for the 21st century* which sets out a framework for all educational fields. People and Society educational field now integrates another educational field People and Values - Religion and Ethics. The main idea behind the change in the educational field is to reinforce its importance in the context of educational programmes. Its mission is to effectively and meaningfully link the social science content of the now separate subjects so that together they form a strong set.

In practice, the framework curriculum from the first year onwards allocates this educational field one lesson per week (compared with the current situation - one lesson of “prvouka”, which is an integrated subject of primary education, predominantly natural science with a minimum of social science content). Unfortunately, there is no increase of

weekly lessons in the second or third cycles, where it has been severely neglected since 2008 and highly criticised by the professional public even in the form of open letters to the Minister of Education several times since 2008.

The new curriculum has succeeded in linking the educational field both horizontally (four components) and vertically (three cycles) so that pupils can gain a holistic knowledge that they apply in their further education and life.

In terms of History the new curriculum works with the concept of historical literacy and inquiry based learning trends in History didactics. The 'new' curriculum shows signs of shifting away from a nation-oriented approach and moving toward a form of history teaching that is expected to promote a different type of social cohesion, basically within the limits of 'promoting social cohesion' (Vajda, p.147). All actors in the reform movement realise that the changes need wide professional support from academia, an update in future teacher training and teachers in practise training.

Position of civic education in Slovakia

In each era and regime the civic education was the subject most under the influence of the political system. Hence in Czechoslovakia civics was a new compulsory subject at national schools introduced by the School Act in 1922 to promote patriotism - awareness of Czechoslovak citizenship, emphasising republicanism and democracy as principles alongside brotherly relationships between Slovaks and Czechs (Tonková, s. 224-5), then in the Slovak state during the WWII national socialism within "social education" instead of civics, and after the WWII Marxist-Leninist ideology which changed civics and history to utilitarian and propagandistic instruments of the regime. The topics then covered the socialist family, sessions of the Communist Party, required commemoration of the Victorious February (the Communist Coup in 1948) or the Victory of the Great October Revolution and even the Month of Czechoslovak-Soviet Friendship (Tonková, p. 229). Civic education was subject to change depending on alterations in the school system and the length of compulsory school attendance. After the reform attempt in the 1960s, during so-called normalization (1970s and 1980s), civics became again very dogmatic. Only after 1989 civics got the chance to become democratic and competence based. Civics is taught 1 lesson per week from 6th to 9th grade at basic school (ISCED2) and 1 - 3 years at high schools (ISCED3).

The iNEP states the characteristics of the subject as:

“The subject contributes to the formation and development of pupils’ social and civic consciousness. Through defined concepts and performances, it conveys the necessary knowledge, skills and acquisition of competences to enable them to orient themselves in the social environment and in everyday life situations. It enables pupils to understand themselves and helps them in their socialisation process. It leads them to learn about their family, school, municipality, region, Slovakia and the European Union. It teaches them to think and act democratically, to know their rights and duties and to defend the rights of others. It provides pupils with basic knowledge of the state and law, enables them to understand the economic life of society and leads them to active civic engagement, one of the important prerequisites of which is critical thinking.”

”OBJECTIVES OF THE COURSE”

Pupils will

- gain awareness of the uniqueness and inimitability of each person in society,
- realistically get to know themselves, evaluate themselves,
- learn the rules and norms of social interaction,
- become aware of their rights and responsibilities and defend their rights appropriately,
- take responsibility for their own opinions, attitudes and the consequences of their actions,
- recognise the basic principles of democracy,
- develop a tolerant attitude towards other views, attitudes, values and cultures,
- learn active citizenship and personal engagement,
- acquire a basic understanding of the socio-economic and legal functioning of society.

The main topics covered in the 6th grade are: my family, my school, my hometown, my country; in the 7th grade social relationships in the society - individual within society; in the 8th grade the topics are state and rule of law, human rights and freedoms; and in the 9th grade they are career choice, economic life of the society, and financial literacy.

The iNEP Civics curriculum for secondary education is criticised for being barely consistent and often tending to copy the structure of academic disciplines. The iNEP for high schools covers thematic units: Man as an individual, Man and society, Citizen and state, Citizen and law, Basic economic problems and their solutions, Market mechanism,

Labour market, Unemployment and its socio-economic impact, The world of work, The role of money and financial institutions.

A non-obligatory social-scientific seminar was introduced at grammar schools and secondary schools in the school year 1993/1994 with two lessons a week in the 3rd and 4th grade.

The School Act 2008 and follow-up directives imperatively emphasise high priority attributed by the national educational policy to civics at both levels, which is irreplaceable “in preparing students for life in its multidimensionality”, so it is somehow a paradox that at the same time, the national educational programme reduced its lessons allocations (traditional lesson per week for individual grades at primary schools changed to 0.5 hour for 8th and 9th grade, lessons of civics were reduced also in 1st and 2nd years at grammar schools, the 3rd year received two lessons and the 4th year one lesson per week). Reduced lessons allocations for humanistic subjects were and still are a fundamental problem (Tonková, p. 238).

Civics is one of the elective subjects of the Baccalaureate examination. The content of the final examination in civics consists of a selected knowledge from social sciences: psychology and sociology; law and political science; economics; philosophy and religious studies.

The School Act

A new curriculum (2023) brings fundamental changes to civic education. The emphasis on civic education is from the very first grade within an integrated subject (former educational field) ‘People and Society’. This subject covers four components: geography, history, civics and ethics. The curriculum is divided in three cycles, in the first and the second one there is an integrated subject with all four components ‘People and Society’ and in the third cycle it can be taught as an integrated, partly integrated or separate subject.

The new curriculum is more competence based - even the content standards are largely formulated as activities. The pupils shall develop basic concepts in the first grade and gradually develop them in the second and third cycle. The educational field especially in civic component of the People and Society incorporates most of the cross curricular competencies (cross curricular “topics” in iNEP) and defines them in performance standards.

Civic education in primary (prvouka, vlastiveda) and secondary education (civics) in iNEP does not directly offer the opportunity to encounter the term citizen. Topics related to citizenship education are scattered in all three grades (rules in different environments: behaviour at the doctor’s, at the pharmacy; existence of (safety) rules at school and on the road; national

symbols; events in the village), but the intention *to get to know key persons, authorities or institutions important for life in the community and village*; the ambition *to make the pupil interested in his/her surroundings* or *to involve him/her in activities to improve them* does not emerge. The **civic component** is therefore an entirely new element in the curriculum. It covers the whole spectrum of topics related to citizenship. It is organised into five thematic units. Through *learning about the rules* at school and in the community, the pupil is introduced to *life in the community and community relations*, which should lead to the pupil's role as an active citizen of the community. It does not only focus on the role of institutions or services, but should *consider*, for example, the *use and maintenance of public space* and its *improvement*.

Dilemmas

In the period between 1989 and now, there were many efforts to innovate and improve the curriculum at all types of schools, however, mostly non-conceptual and non-continuous. The results are, therefore, highly questionable and the change for a systematic approach is essential. Without exaggeration we can claim that the Slovak education system works on inertia. There is no public debate about the quality of education in the humanities in Slovakia. The education system is deformed for various reasons. One of them is international and national testing which in practice means that the main emphasis is put on Slovak language (as if other subjects did not develop reading literacy), and maths. The other circumstances are lack of instruction time for humanities (and not only), lack of qualified teachers, quality textbooks and teaching materials.

In general, there is no long-term systematic research in the field of didactics. For example, CVTI collects data in the field of education on teachers and their qualifications, but does not collect them in detail, so we do not know exactly how many teachers and how many lessons are taught in a fully qualified way. Especially, but not only, in humanities the situation has been critical for a long time, in history since the reduction of lessons in elementary education. Slovakia also faces a long-term problem of the aging of the teaching staff. Teaching as a profession is not seen as attractive, universities even cancelled entrance exams and accepted students without prior selection based on talents, inner motivation or psychological prerequisites for teaching profession. Didactics and pedagogy teachers at universities often lack experience with practical teaching, therefore, they often tend to give academic and theoretical lectures. A short internship in elementary school during university studies is not sufficient.

Conclusion

The Slovak educational system builds on several different systems from the past with different focuses - the monarchist Austro-Hungarian, the democratic Czechoslovak and the post-war Czechoslovak one copying the Soviet model. The education system after the fall of socialism is gradually being transformed into a competence-oriented curriculum and is currently undergoing substantial reform.

The curriculum for history and civics constantly struggles with a lack of instructional time, setting goals toward the cultivation of civic competencies essential to navigate today's world and challenges.

Since in Slovakia there is a plural pedagogical system, especially regarding the teaching methods that are used in the classroom, the system has many positive elements. We can regard it as a positive sign that in Slovakia in the last twenty years we have been witnessing a significant shift toward a more balanced history teaching which concentrates on something other than the 'nation'. It is also good news that this idea is included in the Slovak National Curriculum, both in the 'old' and the 'new' ones alike: 'The main function of history is to cultivate the historical consciousness of the pupil as a holistic personality.' (Vajda, 2023 p. 150). The new curriculum moreover cultivates historical literacy as the main mission of historical education in 21st century.

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