



History Curricula Analysis

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HISTORY IN SCHOOLS IN EAST CENTRAL EUROPE: AN OVERVIEW OF CURRICULA AND TEXTBOOK DEVELOPMENT

The key to understanding the position of the subject of history in the educational system of East and Central European countries (Romania, Bulgaria, Slovakia, and Hungary) lies in the school reforms that have been going on constantly since the fall of Communism. The position of history in the schools has been re-defined by each major political change in these countries, as well as by the determination of state authorities to adjust to the standards demanded by European institutions, most notably the European Union. While the ruling politicians in Central and East Europe before 1989 considered history as one of the most important subjects in the education of their youth, the politicians of post-Communist countries have not been clear about the position of the subject of history in a multi-party system. The reason lies in the perception of history as a school subject that serves for constructing collective identity. This perception has not changed since the 19th century; however, the political contexts have been changing, and this has impacted the position of history education in particular periods. The aim of Communist authorities was to educate citizens dedicated to one single party and to construct the national identity of the majority. The goal of the post-Communist governments of these countries was to remove Communist ideology from the teaching of history. The process of removing the ideas of the previous regime from curricula and history textbooks lasted for varying lengths of time, but in all the countries examined here it came to a similar point in the mid-1990s; the political powers supported the preservation of the position of history in the schools in the educational system due to its importance in the construction of national identity.

European integration marked the second period in the reforms of school systems and the position of history in the curriculum in East Central Europe. This process has been going on since the mid-1990s. The guidelines the Council of Europe presented to the Ministries of Education in East Central European countries may generally be summarized as requiring the development of students' skills through learning history, and the Europeanization of curricula contents. In this context, Europeanization would mainly be understood as the process of marginalizing particular national

identities and developing a unique European identity. The targeted countries have not implemented equally the program of changes in history teaching formulated in this way in their educational systems.

Since the changes in school curricula are initiated by the state authorities, it has been the government officers who have been of key importance in the implementation of the instructions given by the European institutions. Since the fall of Communism the governments in East Central European countries have changed relatively often and numerous political parties that have occupied the key state positions have supported the idea of a particular national identity, which has resulted in negative attitudes towards the proposed school reforms.

The most active time for changing the history curricula in Romania in the primary and secondary schools was the second half of the 1990s. The Act on Schools was first harmonized with the European principles in 1995 and was additionally amended in 1997 and 1999. This Act required implementing the principles of diversity and multiculturalism in the educational system.¹ Upon adoption of these Acts, new curricula were created for teaching history in 1995 and 1999, first for primary and then for secondary schools. School reform was mainly supported by the World Bank, after signing a contract with Romania in 1995, until 2002. The suggestions and guidelines Romania was supposed to implement became a part of curricula adopted at that time, but the core remained Romanian national history. According to the national curriculum, history became part of a group of mandatory school subjects for grades 4 to 12, that is, for students from 10/11 to 18/19 years of age. On average, 1.5 classes were taught per week, and in higher grades the curriculum allowed for additional classes on local history and the history of art as optional subjects.² According to the curriculum, the goal of history teaching was to be a balanced proportion of knowledge and skills that a student was supposed to learn during school education.

The general goals of history curricula in Romanian schools from grades 4 to 9 were meant to enable the students to understand time and space in history, to work with historical sources, to conduct research on historical events, to understand and adequately use historical terms, to encourage students to learn history, and to develop positive relations towards themselves and others. According to the curriculum, the students in grades 10 to 12 were supposed to acquire the following abilities in history teaching: working with information from primary and secondary historical sources, using historical terminology in written and verbal communication, and using particular historical methods and techniques. The main values and attitudes the students of these grades were supposed to develop were: understanding their own identity and identity of others, as well as social and ethnic surroundings;

¹ Simona Szakacs, *Now and Then: National Identity Construction in Romanian History Textbooks. A Comparative Study*, Masters' thesis, Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology, Central European University, Budapest, 2005, p. 27.

² Mihai Manea, "Romania", in: *We and Our Neighbours. The Majority and the Minorities in Recent History Textbooks in Romania, Bulgaria and Hungary*, ed. Mihai Manea, Bucharest: Educatia, 2004, p. 15, Carol Capita, "Small World, Big Country. A Reappraisal of Europe in Romanian History Teaching", in: *History for Today and Tomorrow. What does Europe Mean for School History?*, ed. Joke van der Leeuw-Roord, Hamburg: Edition Körber-Stiftung, 2001, p. 72.

understanding the role of history as an important factor of changes in contemporary society; developing an interest in reading historical literature; understanding the importance of racial, ethnic, religious, national, social, gender, and professional identities.³

While the goals of history teaching in Romanian primary and secondary schools were harmonized with the given instructions for the most part, the historical topics that were supposed to be dealt with in teaching process did not follow European trends. The text of the curriculum reveals that general and Romanian national history existed in parallel, almost unrelated. There was one general topic for each grade:

- 4th grade: Romanian history
- 5th grade: world history up to the year 1000
- 6th grade: world history - Middle Ages and Modern Times up to 1815
- 7th grade: world history - 19th and 20th century
- 8th grade: Romanian history
- 9th grade: world history - Ancient Times and the Middle Ages
- 10th grade: world history - Late Middle Ages and Early Modern Times
- 11th grade: world history - Modern Times and the 20th century.
- 12th grade: Romanian history⁴

Such a division gave a quantitatively large space to general, predominantly European, history while Romanian history found its place separated in three school years. This left space for a particular role of national history in the development of a collective memory and collective identity of Romanians.

The situation was similar regarding the relations between the recommended standards and changes in the history curriculum in Bulgaria, where the Act on Public Education was adopted in 1991. The curriculum was included in the Act on Public Education in 1999, the same year the development of Romanian national curriculum was completed, and it began to be implemented in the school year of 2000/2001. History was grouped along with the subjects of geography, philosophy, civil education, and the optional subject of religious classes. It was a mandatory subject from grade 5 to grade 12, that is, for students of 12 to 19 years of age. On average, teachers held 1.5 history classes per week. The history curriculum in general was similar to that in Romania one, for example, in the distribution of topics from national and general history:

- 5th grade: history of Bulgaria up to the end of the 17th century
- 6th grade: history of Bulgaria from the 18th to the 20th century
- 7th grade: world history - Ancient Times
- 8th grade: world history - Middle Ages
- 9th grade: world history - Modern Times
- 10th grade: world history - 20th century
- 11th grade: Bulgarian history
- 12th grade: the role of history; nations and national states of the Balkans in modern and contemporary times (Modern Times and the 20th century)⁵

³ The Romanian curriculum of 1999, see: Mihai Manea, "Romania", pp. 16-17.

⁴See: Carol Capita, "Small World, Big Country. A Reappraisal of Europe in Romanian History Teaching", p. 72.

A more detailed insight into the text of the curriculum of 1999 gives a different picture than that stemming from the above-mentioned division. In the detailed curriculum there are minor topics (from 6 to 13 topics, depending on the grade) which are mandatory in history teaching in Bulgaria. Under the general topic of Bulgarian history in the program for grade 5 there is also a sub-topic the everyday life of our ancestors. In grade 7, along with political history, the religious history of the Ancient Times is taught as well, with a topic on everyday life related to it. In history for grade 8, generally designed for the history of the European Middle Ages, there are topics such as: ideas in medieval Europe or an individual in the Middle Ages and his/her mentality.

A number of topics based on the development of American and Western European historiography in the last decades of the 20th century were included in the history teaching in grades 11 and 12, such as: places of memory, history and historical perspective, the nation and its institutions in Western Europe, the historical heritage and ideology of a nation state, institutions of memory and the nation state, and Balkan nations between history and mass media.⁶ Generally speaking, topics from the curriculum on world history are equally represented by the traditional approach of the history of events and an approach based on modern historiographical developments. In contrast, the topics from Bulgarian national history remain mainly tied to the political history of the Bulgarian state. A similar conclusion can be drawn from the part of curriculum related to the goals of history education. Thus, students of grade 11 are expected to be able to: retell the history of the development of Bulgarian people; retell the history of the development of Bulgarian culture as a part of the Balkan and European history; understand the role of religion, state, ethnic and social communities in the development and preservation of the Bulgarian identity; understand the role of people in historical process; develop skills to work with different sources.⁷

The history curriculum in Bulgarian schools is a result of the influence of European institutions aiming to Europeanize the school system and the decision of the curriculum writers to apply their knowledge of developments in modern historiography. However, topics constructing a particular national identity and creating a collective historical memory remain a parallel primary goal of history teaching in Bulgaria.

In Hungary, the process of changing the national curriculum was subject to political and public debates that hindered the adoption of the national curriculum for quite some time. In the period of 1989 to 1994 a number of texts of the potential curriculum were proposed by the experts of the Ministry of Education, and experts outside that body, but these initiatives failed due to attacks by

⁵ *We and Our Neighbours. The Majority and the Minorities in the Recent History Textbooks in Romania, Bulgaria and Hungary*, ed. Mihai Manea, Bucharest: Educatja, 2004, pp. 20-23.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

particular political parties of teachers' syndicates (unions). Meanwhile, history teachers in primary and secondary schools themselves decided what they would teach.⁸ The national curriculum was adopted by the Hungarian government in 1995, and three more years passed before its application. Europeanization partly found a place in the new school system. While European, and particularly Western European history found a place in history curricula concurrently with Hungarian national history, due to the desire for the development of the knowledge of facts among students the curriculum left little space for the development of their skills.⁹ According to the curriculum that was in use until 2004, history was taught in grades 5 to 12, and in each grade world history was presented along with Hungarian history. History in schools belonged in the group of subjects called 'An individual and society'. The tasks and the importance of history in schools were presented quite clearly in the curriculum, with a comment on the importance of history in the development of both national and European identity. Within the task of creating a common European identity, it was claimed that the students were supposed to be the citizens of the European Union and at the same time they were supposed to preserve their own Hungarian national identity, and this was to be achieved through learning about the history of their own country and nation, together with learning about European history. The idea of history as a collective memory of the society found its place in the text of the Hungarian curriculum. The goal of history teaching in schools was the adoption of historical knowledge that would help in developing understanding among communities. The authors of the text believed that by learning about history students would develop their own national identity, and concurrently, a European identity. The curriculum also claimed that students should understand that the present was influenced by the past and would shape the future. Such general observations regarding the role of history in society appeared in several places in the curriculum. Yet, at the same time, advice suggesting a multi-perspective approach in teaching and the development of analytical skills of students was neglected. The goal of developing skills existed, in a normative sense, in the structure of a history class, where students had the task to gather information, and then to think critically, communicate their observations to the class, orientate the topic in space and time, determine the elements of topic contents and form a conclusion about the topic, which was discussed during the class.¹⁰

After the fall of Communism in Czechoslovakia, one of the first measures of the new government regarding history teaching was the removal of Communist propaganda from the school program. Although Czechoslovakia separated in 1993, creating the Czech and Slovak Republics, Slovakia only got its national curriculum four years later. In the meanwhile, school history was taught according

⁸ Anne Low-Beer, *Seminar on the Reform of History Teaching in Schools in European Countries in Democratic Traditions*, Strasbourg, 1995, p. 10.

⁹ Laszlo Bero and Vilmos Vass, "Teaching and Learning about Europe in Hungary", in: *History for Today and Tomorrow. What Does Europe Mean for School History*, ed. Joke van der Leeuw-Roord, Hamburg: Edition Körber-Stiftung, 2001, pp. 140-145.

¹⁰ *We and our Neighbours. The Majority and the Minorities in Recent History Textbooks in Romania, Bulgaria and Hungary*, Bucharest: Educatja, 2004, pp. 18-19.

to the Czechoslovak program, but most of the contents dealing with Czech history were removed from the curricula.

After the adoption of a national curriculum for Slovak schools in 1997, the contents of history teaching did not change significantly compared to the previous four years. Historical narration of Slovak national development remained the central topic of history education and less attention was paid to world history. Europeanization or the creation of a new European identity through history education found little space in the new curriculum. The development and creation of a critical historical awareness in students, who were supposed to understand the past and present of their country and its position in Europe, was considered the basic goal of history education. The text of the curriculum was rather inconsistent and confusing. It was expected that students would develop critical thinking through history education, and at the same time history was expected to inspire the revival of traditions, to teach the young about right and wrong, and to guide them in creating their own political consciousness.¹¹ A new reform of the Slovak school system, including changes in history teaching, came into force in 2008. According to it, changes in the curricula of history teaching were supposed to be implemented gradually, so in 2008 they affected only grade 5 of primary schools and grade 1 of secondary schools. The plan was to introduce changes for one more grade in each following year, so the reform is now half-way to its realization. The first measure in the reform was to decrease the number of history classes (per week) from 2 to 1, both in primary and secondary schools. The new history curriculum did not change much in comparison to the one issued in 1997. According to the new curriculum, the key change was to lower the number of classes dedicated to world history of Ancient Times and the Middle Ages, and to expand the Slovak national history of the 19th and 20th century, where most space would be given to national heroes. The authors of the curriculum claimed that the reason for this change was the need to develop patriotic feelings among students and to cherish their historical consciousness, which was not supposed to contradict the democratic values of European civilization.¹² This curriculum did not pay much attention to the promotion of modern approaches in education, and the knowledge of facts from national political history received even more significant meaning compared to the time prior to 2008.

Writing and publishing textbooks in East Central Europe is much more dynamic than the adoption of national curricula. Although there are some exceptions, textbook production followed the completion of the first curricula after the fall of Communism. Generally, writers and publishers of the textbooks were obliged to follow the instructions and topics set in the curriculum.

¹¹ The text of the history curriculum for Slovak schools from 1997 can be found at the web page: www.statpedu.sk/sk/filemanager/download/103

¹² The text of the history curriculum for Slovak schools from 2008 can be found at the web page: <http://www.minedu.sk/index.php?lang=sk&rootId=2319>

After the change of regime in 1989, the Ministry of Education in Romania decided to radically erase the Communist past by approving a new edition of a school history textbook dating back to the early 1940s. This attempt at quick revision of the officially propagated past failed before the textbook came into use. The old textbooks remained in use, removing certain chapters related to Communist propaganda and the Ceausescu regime. New textbooks on Romanian history were printed in 1991 and 1992, and after 1995 the authorities allowed greater liberalization of textbook market, canceling the monopoly of government in the production of textbooks. However, in secondary education, no more than three textbooks are allowed for each grade of gymnasium, while such limitations do not exist for other secondary schools. The national textbook license commission assesses the content of textbooks and selects those that can be used. One of the conditions for the selection is the level of compliance of the textbook with the national curricula, which has to be at least 85% of the content. As a rule, teachers and professors are supposed to select the most appropriate textbook themselves. Primary school textbooks are free to students, so schools order the books from the publishers independently. Textbooks selected this way must be in use for at least five years before a school is again entitled to another order free of charge. This does not apply to secondary education, where there is an open market for the distribution and use of school textbooks.¹³

The Slovak production of textbooks was very similar to that in Romania in the first years after 1989. Until the split of Czechoslovakia, the schools used books from the 1980s, except chapters that glorified the Communist regime. In the early 1990s, the first revised texts on modern national history were written as additions to the existing textbooks. These were the first textbook texts produced solely for Slovak schools. The first new history textbooks in Slovakia were published between 1993 and 1997, which happened, however, before the adoption of national curricula. Although the state authorities ordered writing history textbooks for gymnasiums already in the mid-1990s, they were not published until 2000, 2003, and 2005, depending on the grade of gymnasium. In the meanwhile, history teachers in gymnasiums were using Czechoslovak textbooks. The production and distribution of textbooks in Slovakia is extremely centralized. The government allows the printing of one textbook per grade for both primary and secondary schools and every school is obliged to provide its students with a free copy. The only attempt to liberalize these measures was an unsuccessful experiment at the end of the 1990s that aimed to produce two different textbooks for each grade of gymnasium, where the teachers themselves would select which one they would use in classes.¹⁴ The education reforms of 2008, which included changes in the history curriculum, planned the production of new textbooks, which have not

¹³ Mirela-Luminița Murgescu, "Romania", in: *Clio in the Balkans. The Politics of History Education*, ed. Christina Koulouri, Thessaloniki: Center for Democracy and Reconciliation in Southeast Europe, 2002, pp. 498-500.

¹⁴ More can be found at <http://korzar.sme.sk/c/4543142/ucebnice-dejepisu-pre-tretiakov-na-gymnaziach-neexistuju-ostatnych-je-tiez-minimum.html>

been printed to date. In the meanwhile, textbooks that are ten years old or older are still in use in schools.

Slovak textbooks are, in terms of content, divided between national and world history, so there are two history textbooks for each grade of primary and secondary schools. This has created two narrative histories, not connected to each other. In Romania, this separation is emphasized even more, as history teaching is split in such a way that in some grades only Romanian national history is taught and in some grades only world history is taught. European and Romanian histories remained insufficiently interconnected, and the instructions included in the curricula have thus not been implemented.¹⁵

Generally speaking, the contents of history textbooks in the countries of East Central Europe combine representations of national and world history. Didactic and theoretical approaches regarding the topics presented has not changed much compared with the textbooks that were in use before the school reforms started. Requirements for modernization that would include multiperspectivity in history teaching, including tasks to develop students' skills, have not been implemented satisfactorily, although they were explicitly claimed in most of the curricula discussed here. Textbook authors have avoided modern methods either because they did not know them or due to public and political opinions, which often do not favor any non-official interpretations of the past. The result has been that the textbooks produced contained mainly chapters on political history, with minor chapters on social and cultural history or the history of everyday life.

The Romanian example clearly illustrates the problems regarding the setting of the contents of history textbooks. The textbook for grade 12, published in 1999, became the subject of parliamentary and public debate. The reason was that the authors interpreted some processes in Romanian national history under the influence of the latest developments in historiography. The opponents of the textbook attacked the usage of the term inventing the nation in the textbook. Because of its non-canonical approach to the Romanian national past, the members of opposition political parties labeled the textbook as counter to the state, while the state Senate called for its public burning.¹⁶ Such reactions of politicians are discouraging the authors of the textbooks. Apart from demythologizing history and coping with the achievements of modern historiography, textbook authors are also responsible for improving didactic and theoretical approaches, which have been often missing in textbook production.

¹⁵ Carol Capita, "Small World, Big Country. A Reappraisal of Europe in Romanian History Teaching", p. 79.

¹⁶ Simona Szakacs, *Now and Then: National Identity Construction in Romanian History Textbooks. A Comparative Study*, p. 1.

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