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20 years with the EU in civic education in Slovakia²

SUMMARY The article focuses on the changes that occurred in civic education after the revolution in 1989 and seeks to identify the reasons why the entry of the Slovak Republic into the EU was insufficiently reflected in the content of this education. It mainly examines curriculum changes and civic education within lower and upper secondary education. The article articulates the challenges facing civic education in Slovakia in connection with the new school reform, highlighting the constant reforms that have not been completed as a significant reason for the current state. Given that education is currently awaiting another reform, a significant factor identified is the willingness of teachers to participate in it in terms of content, or at least to implement it in practice.

KEYWORDS civic education, curricula, reforms

Introduction

Civic education in Slovakia has undergone significant changes in the past decades. Since civics is a very specific subject within the system of educational subjects, both in terms of focus and content, its content standards are often updated to reflect the social and political changes that society is experiencing. Civic education largely mirrors society's values and state policies. The civics curriculum underwent significant changes even before the Slovak Republic joined the EU because, in the post-revolutionary period, the content of the subject had

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to be adapted to the new social reality. The societal transformation that occurred after the revolution in 1989 in Slovakia, then still part of a common state with the Czechs, had to be significantly reflected in humanities subjects, especially civics. The greatest burden rested on the shoulders of the teachers. However, many of them were not trusted by the representatives of the new regime. Given their education and previous political activity, these teachers were viewed with suspicion or even rejected in their role, which they were supposed to play in educating the youngest generation.

The post-revolutionary years, up to approximately 1994, are described by some authors as pioneer years (Zelina, 2021) and are connected with the effort to build a democratic system of education in Slovakia and remove ideological bias from the content of education. Since it was explicitly stated in the civics curriculum at the time that it contributed to the “communist education of young people” (Učebné osnovy gymnázia Občianska náuka 3rd-4th grade 1983, p. 3), it was initially considered to exclude the subject from education altogether. During those years, the old school law from 1984 was still in force, but it was massively innovated and changed.

The first reform document, worked on by M. Hejný, L. Ďurič, I. Turek, M. Zelina, V. Burjan, M. Krankus, and others, was called *Duch školy* (The Spirit of the School). Its aim was to give schools and education a new spirit and to define the goals of education and training. This primarily involved removing the ideological influence from education and exploring new ways of financing it. The authors of the first education reform were aware of the importance of the wider teaching community’s participation in its content:

The success or failure of any innovation in education or its reform depends on the attitude of teachers. It is therefore essential that teachers actively participate in every innovation or reform of education, and to realize that the problems of education are ultimately social problems that cannot be solved simply by carrying out some reform only within the framework of education. There should be synergy between society and education (Turek, 1993, p. 131).

Zelina states that in this short phase (1989–1994), the educational policy of the state, the pro-reform attitudes of teachers, and public opinion were in harmony (Zelina, 2021, p. 115). The transformation of the concept of the content of education was also related to the currently issued international documents and recommendations in the field of education and training. In 1990, an expert

group of the Ministry of Education was established, with the main task of preparing curricula and textbooks. From 1991, the preparation of new curricula for citizenship education began, but they were not completed until 1993. Until the development of the new curriculum, curriculum modifications were applied through methodological instructions that responded to changes in the Constitution of the Czechoslovak Republic. For example, they also suggested that teachers explain to students, in an appropriate way, the changes taking place in Europe. The Ministry of Education and Science of the Slovak Republic approved the civics curriculum for secondary schools, effective from September 1, 1993.

In 1994, two reform documents began to be drawn up: the National Education and Training Program under the name *Konštantín*, on which 30 experts worked, including V. Rosa, S. Christenko, P. Ondrejko, M. Zelina, E. Kratochvílová, I. Turek, I. Macura, I. Kovalčíková, S. Matúšová, and others. The *Konštantín* project was not implemented as a whole, but parts of its proposals were gradually incorporated into amendments to some laws. By December of the same year, work on the *Konštantín* project had ceased, and a new concept of education under the name *Škola roku 2000* (School of 2000) began to be developed. This project was also not fully implemented. On the other hand, the *Education Act* of 1984 was amended in 1994. The amendment defined the rights of national minorities to education in their language, created space for entrepreneurial activities of schools, and for the first time enshrined in law (No. 230/1994 Coll.) the possibility of establishing private and church secondary schools, vocational schools, elementary art schools, and practical teaching centers.

Until 1996, there were no teaching materials. A collective of authors led by Erich Mistrík published auxiliary teaching material under the title *Citizen Education*. This material was intended for students in the 6th–9th grades of elementary school and the 1st–2nd grades of secondary school. A methodological manual for teachers was also published. *Citizen Education* was divided into five parts: *Family and Home*, *Individual and Society*, *Human Rights and Basic Freedoms*, *Ethical Values and Ecology*, and *Global Problems of Humanity* (Mistrík, 1996). For secondary schools, a series of textbooks were gradually published that aligned with the civics curriculum. These textbooks covered topics such as the basics of psychology, sociology, law, family and sex education, aesthetics and etiquette, ethics, economics, and the history of philosophy. Textbooks suitable for Civics in lower and upper secondary education were gradually published. Currently, they have their own updated versions, though a large part of upper secondary education teachers still use the revised textbooks from 1995 to 1997 as basic material.

In December 1997, the *Education Act* of 1984 was again amended, extending compulsory school attendance from 9 to 10 years (Act No. 6/1998). Since 1999, work on a new reform project began anew. In December 1999, the authors V. Rosa, I. Turek, and M. Zelina presented the *Milenium project* for public discussion. In addition to the three main authors, 12 expert groups worked on the project. Prior to Slovakia's accession to the EU, educational innovation took place in connection with several key documents: the *White Paper of the EC on Teaching and Learning* (1995), the *Copenhagen Declaration of the EC on Vocational Education* (2002), and the *Convention of the International Labor Organization on the Right of Employees to Further Education*. Additionally, new provisions of the *Constitutional Act of the Czechoslovak Republic* (1991) on the application of general rights and freedoms according to the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* were included in the *Constitution of the Slovak Republic* in 1992. It is also important to note that to induct post-socialist countries into the prescribed democratic value system, the Council of Europe and the EU sponsored numerous civic education projects, which significantly aided teachers in the process.

There were more than a thousand comments and suggestions for the *Milenium project*, indicating that the wider community still saw the next reform as an opportunity to elevate education to a higher level. On December 19, 2001, the Slovak government approved the *National Education and Training Program in the Slovak Republic for the next 15–20 years – the Milenium project*. The *Milenium project* presents a new curricular policy aimed at a two-level and participatory curriculum model, focusing on targets, key competencies, content, and performance standards. The *Milenium project* was published in 2002 in Slovak and English (Rosa, Turek, & Zelina, 2001) and was also presented abroad. On May 22, 2008, the members of the NR SR approved the new *Education Act* (No. 245/2008 Coll.) based on the *Milenium project*. This *Education and Training Act* (School Act) was designed to last 15–20 years, so its validity should be slowly expiring, but due to constant amendments, the law is still in effect today. It became effective on September 1, 2008.

A number of experts have analyzed why the intended reforms did not materialize in school practice. Many argue that the initiative and desire to reform education is slowly fading away.

The Slovak school reform of 2008 is a prime example of the loss of general professional autonomy and top-down reform. Neither the reform changes nor the curriculum were publicly discussed, commented on, or pilot tested. The political

protagonists of the structural change seem to have completely disregarded the need for cultural and procedural change within schools and classrooms. They did not even accept expert reservations that the top-down reform strategy does not work and must be supplemented by a bottom-up initiative, or that successful reform requires unskippable steps (Fullan 2007). (Kosová, 2017, p. 127).

Despite the entry of the Slovak Republic into the EU and the direct focus of civics on forming an active EU citizen since 2004, the curriculum of civics as a compulsory subject from 1997 has continued to apply to four-year high schools. In terms of curriculum, the approval of the new school law in 2008 had a greater impact on civic education than the entry of the Slovak Republic into the EU. During the four years that passed between the entry of the Slovak Republic into the EU and the new school law, teachers mostly improvised, as they were used to doing. Slovakia's entry into the OECD (2000) and the EU (2004) brought new impulses to the processes of educational transformation at the macro level.

The content of the civics curriculum for upper secondary education was conceived in accordance with the 1997 curriculum. It was and still is composed of selected knowledge from psychology, sociology, economics, the science of the state and law, human rights and freedoms, political science, and philosophy. The subject was taught in the third and fourth years of study (3rd year: 1 hour per week; 4th year: 2 hours per week). The basics of psychology, sociology, economics, law, and political science were taught in the third year. In the fourth year, there was a choice of three variants that dealt with the basics of philosophy, with the vast majority choosing the historical model of teaching philosophy.

In secondary vocational schools, the civics curriculum approved by the Ministry of Education and Science of the Slovak Republic under number 1916/1993-31 dated April 9, 1993, was applied. The curriculum was divided into the second, third, and fourth grades (or alternatively the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd years) with a time allocation of 1 hour per week. Since the approval of the *Milenium* program, teachers have had the opportunity to make an appropriate choice of subject matter in accordance with the needs of the students and the school. The civics curriculum for these subjects was approved by the Ministry of Education and Science of the Slovak Republic under number 2085/1993-32 on April 14, 1993, with effect from September 1, 1993. The civics curriculum was intended for: three-year study fields of secondary vocational schools (SOU), four-year study fields of SOU, study fields of SOU for graduates of three-year study fields. In each grade, it was allocated 1 hour per week. The curriculum notes stated that it "is a framework and has an

orientational character” (Občianska náuka, 1993, p. 6). Teachers could choose from topics intended for gymnasiums and secondary vocational schools.

In civic education, teachers mainly encountered a lack of suitable teaching materials. Methodical centers did not provide appropriate support, and in connection with the new law that mandated continuous education for teachers, they focused more on offering various courses for which teachers received credits than on creating methodical materials. This gap was partially filled by the third sector, which offered various materials that were often ideologically very sharp. How to introduce European citizenship to the young generation and what this concept means depended on the skill and willingness of specific teachers, a situation not unique to Slovak education. Keating stated in her article in 2009 that:

What is apparent, however, is that there has been a shift away from the narrow focus on promoting a ‘European dimension’, and towards a broader platform that promotes active citizenship and its European dimension, namely a European citizenship. Yet what the European dimension to (citizenship) education could or should entail is not always clear, even to European policy actors themselves. Thus, there was sufficient ambiguity about this concept to require the European Commission to set up a working group to try to define its meaning and educational implications (European Commission 2004, 9–13). (Keating et al., 2009, p. 151).

The penultimate stage of education reforms in Slovakia is associated with the project named *Učíace sa Slovensko* (Learning Slovakia) (Burjan et al., 2017). The concept was created by renowned experts such as V. Burjan, J. Vantúch, E. Višňovský, and others, and their efforts were supported by many practicing teachers. However, in 2017, the project *Učíace sa Slovensko* was declared unfeasible by the minister at the time, and work on it ceased.

Starting from 2023, testing of another reform known as the curricular reform began in Slovak schools from the first year onwards. This occurred despite protests regarding its unpreparedness from trade unions, the Slovak Association of Teachers, the Slovak Geographical Society, Associations of elementary schools in Slovakia, and many others. Research conducted as part of the APVV project at the UMB Faculty of Education confirmed the negative perception of Slovak education and reform changes by teachers. The research revealed that 85% of teachers expressed there were no significant positive changes in education after 1989, 81% felt that the overall development of education did not lead to improvement. Only 51% believed that reforms should be continued, while 43% thought it necessary to return to the situation before 1989 (Kosová, 2017, p. 128). It can be concluded that

teachers are fatigued and disillusioned with constant reforms in both the education system and its content. They view these reforms as an unreasonable bureaucratic and administrative burden with no discernible positive outcomes. Even 25 years after the revolution, international testing results do not show improvement in pupils' knowledge, and the low voter turnout of Slovaks in European Parliament elections does not indicate success in civic education. Consequently, there is limited support for the current latest reform, evident even in petitions against it.

Changes in civic education have been motivated by political and social shifts and have been closely tied to broader education reforms. The accession of the Slovak Republic to the EU did not come with adequate methodological materials for teachers in civic education, nor were there study materials for students. Consequently, it fell upon the willingness and expertise of teachers to incorporate EU accession into civic education. Over time, topics related to European citizenship and European educational policies have been included in textbooks, but some recommendations are still pending incorporation.

However, teachers are now facing another reform where the content has not been properly communicated to them, and once again they lack methodological support. At the lower levels, current civic education covers topics primarily related to European institutions, their administrative functions, and foundational documents. At higher levels, however, the focus remains on imparting fundamental knowledge from various disciplines such as sociology, law, psychology, political science, and philosophy. The impact of the curriculum reform on the content of civic education remains uncertain for teachers. There is a prevailing hope within the teaching community that the reform will either not proceed or will be limited to primary education, with a different reform implemented at higher levels. The quality of civic education, particularly given that it is one of the subjects most frequently taught by unqualified teachers in Slovakia, warrants a separate discussion. In any case, many teachers have had negative experiences with education reforms. Since the success of any reform largely depends on them, it is plausible that the visions of the authors of the latest reform will encounter challenges if this reform is implemented.

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20 lat współpracy z UE w zakresie edukacji obywatelskiej na Słowacji

STRESZCZENIE Artykuł skupia się na zmianach, jakie zaszły w edukacji obywatelskiej po rewolucji w 1989 r., i ma na celu zidentyfikowanie przyczyn, dla których przystąpienie Republiki Słowackiej do Unii Europejskiej nie znalazło wystarczającego odzwierciedlenia w treściach tej edukacji. Analizuje on głównie zmiany programowe oraz edukację obywatelską w ramach szkolnictwa średniego I i II stopnia. Artykuł przedstawia wyzwania stojące przed edukacją obywatelską na Słowacji w związku z nową reformą szkolną, podkreślając ciągle reformy, które nie zostały zakończone, jako istotną przyczynę obecnego stanu rzeczy. Biorąc pod uwagę, że edukacja czeka obecnie na kolejną reformę, istotnym czynnikiem jest gotowość nauczycieli do udziału w niej pod względem merytorycznym lub przynajmniej gotowość do wdrożenia jej w praktyce.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE edukacja obywatelska, programy nauczania, reformy

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