

Policy brief

Making History Work for Tolerance



Network of Education Policy Centers

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This publication is a result of the project Making History Work for Tolerance: A Research-Based Strategy to Reduce the Intolerant Usage of History Teaching in Three EU Member States funded by The Think Tank Fund of the Open Society Foundations.

The Project addresses the need to reduce political manipulations with history education in order to increase tolerance among majority and minority population (including migrants) and to reduce xenophobia in three EU countries – Denmark, Latvia and Slovakia, through research, direct work with teachers and advocacy.

Partner organization(s):

Centre for Public Policy PROVIDUS, Latvia

Danish History Teachers Association, Denmark

Orava Association for Democratic Education, Slovakia

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1 Introduction

The project Making History work for Tolerance: A Research-Based Strategy to Reduce the Intolerant Usage of History Teaching addresses the need to reduce political manipulations with history education in order to increase tolerance among majority and minority population (including migrants) and to reduce xenophobia. The project is intended to contribute to practice-oriented activities such as trainings for history teachers, enabling them to resist politicisation of history education and to promote a critical and reflective approach to learning about the past and its implications for the coexistence of different groups in society.

Network of Education Policy Centres together with Danish History Teachers' Association, Centre for Public Policy PROVIDUS (Latvia) and Orava Association for Democratic Education (Slovakia) have conducted joint research, questioning the ways in which political narratives and perceptions of the role of different groups (majority and minority) in society are projected in history teaching in Denmark, Latvia and Slovakia.¹

The recommendations following from the study indicate ways to support to teachers' ability to resist political and xenophobic pressures and to enable them to continue as professional and creative educators with their task of educating critical and tolerant citizens who support equality between citizens of different backgrounds and their joint ownership of their society and state.

When seeking to understand how political narratives and perceptions of the role of different groups (majority and minority) in society are projected in history teaching, we have focused on four different levels:

- The political level: debate between different political interests in the public sphere about the sense or meaning of the

nation state. Such debate often concerns criteria of membership in the nation, projecting old and new stereotypes about 'us' (majority, increasingly labelled 'state-founding nation') and 'them' (old and new minorities, usually understood in cultural terms).

- The policy level: history curricula and other policy documents defining the goals of history teaching in today's society.
- The professional: the opinions of experts and history teachers on the role of history teaching in elucidating conflict and coexistence of different groups in society and promoting a certain understanding of nation, society and tolerance, as well as the obstacles to promoting a more critical and less intolerant perspective.
- The student level: students as the ultimate target audience of discourses promoted through history teaching.

The present study addressed the political and the policy levels through desk research. The political level was explored by studying publications of speeches, interviews and other expressions of opinion of political party leaders and policy makers, focusing on the presence of what has been termed 'ethnic discourses'.² The policy level has been explored by identifying the goals of history teaching as described in national curricula, as well as the space accorded to teaching the history of minorities and migrants within national curriculum. The professional level was explored through interviews with history didactics experts and with history teachers. The students level was reflected through focus groups with students, asking them to share their experience of learning

¹ Making History Work for Tolerance - Comparative report, 2014

² See Teun A, Van Dijk(2000) Ideologies, Racism, Discourse: Debate on Immigration and Ethnic Issues, in: Jessika ter Wal & Maykel Verkuyten (Eds.), Comparative perspectives on racism. (pp. 91-116). Aldershot etc.: Ashgate.

history in connection with learning about different groups in society and acquiring understanding of different perspectives on past and present conflicts and issues of intolerance and discrimination.

2 Findings of the study

2.1 Politicisation of history and exclusive vision of the nation-state

Politicisation of history has become a permanent feature in a number of countries in Europe, including countries in this study, due to the nature of debates about national identity sparked by politicians and opinion leaders.

In Slovakia, debates about the place of minorities in society have led to political statements claiming that history of the country is to be understood as a path to creating the state for the Slovak majority. Thus, in February 2013 Prime Minister Robert Fico claimed that the Slovak state “has not been established preferentially for minorities, although we respect them, but primarily for the Slovak state-creating nation,” which led him to conclude that minorities are making too many demands on the state and not sufficiently cultivating citizens’ virtues. The claims provoked a heated debate in the national media and protests from representatives of minorities.³

A very similar debate has happened in Latvia prior to the adoption of the new National Identity and Intergation Policy Guidelines⁴ in 2011, when a leading legal expert E. Levits proposed the thesis (accepted in the policy document) that Latvia as a state has been created

by the Latvians, a culturally defined state-founding nation, and citizens not belonging to this cultural group have to be defined either as minorities or immigrants.⁵

In Denmark, the debate in the public about the influence of immigration on culture has repeatedly generated arguments claiming that the core Danish identity, based on Danish national history, Danish language, religion, and other Danish values is threatened. Many opinion leaders actively opposed the option of Denmark developing as a multicultural society.

The Latvian and Slovak research reports for this study show that power relations reflected in political discourses support the notion that history of the ethnic majority or the ‘state-creating nation’ is *the history that has to be taught in schools. This discourse relegates the history of other groups to the margins, even if elements of minority history are included in the curriculum.*

2.2 Experts and teachers: expectations and pressures

Interviews with history teaching experts and history teachers reveal that in Latvia and Slovakia, history teachers are more exposed to political discourses

Tolerance from a history teaching point of view is understanding, how and why differing narratives of an event develop and persist in public memory. History teaching expert, Slovakia

The worst that can happen is when teacher sees history only as black and white; divides everything into bad and good and then pushes this on a student. This goes against a system which belongs to a democratic state. History teaching expert, Latvia

3 <http://www.snn.sk/index.php/slovensko/1395-robert-fico-stat-sme-zalozili-pre-slovakov>

4 Cabinet of Ministers (2011), Nacionālās identitātes, pilsoniskās sabiedrības un integrācijas politikas pamatnostādnes.

5 The thesis was first articulated at the Lawyers’ Days seminar in 2010, J. Pleps, G. Litvins (2010), Latvijas tauta, nacionāla valsts un dubuļpilsonība. Jurista Vārds, 03.08.2010.

treating history as a basis for an exclusive vision of the nation state.

In Latvia, the subject of History in lower secondary school has been separated into History of Latvia and History of the world, after pressures by opinion leaders claiming that the uniqueness of Latvia as a nation state is in danger. Latvian history teaching experts have noted that history curriculum does not dictate unitary views on history of Latvia, allowing teachers and students to use different approaches and materials, and to compare different views on history. The underlying history narrative in many cases, however, is still often influenced by cultural nationalism. Other experts in the media have noted the radicalisation of political views in minority (Russian-language) schools, linked to the current growth of non-democratic discourses in Russia and in Russian-language history literature, including glorification of Stalinism and Soviet Union and occasionally denying the mass violations of human rights and mass murders.⁶

Teachers' interviews in Latvia reflected a high degree of uncertainty about external stakeholders' (politicians and journalists) expectations and demands on history teaching, as well as a sense of frequent interference from the media in the work of history educators, approaching history teaching with narrowly understood criteria of 'teaching patriotism' and applying standards that are far more limiting than those outlined in national curriculum. History Teachers' Association of Latvia has been criticised in the media for a 'cosmopolitan' position, and the daily media 'test' students, in order to see whether their knowledge of dates deemed important in national remembrance culture is adequate to what the media expect. When they fail, the teachers and policy makers are blamed for not teaching history well enough.

In Slovakia, given the political uses of history in leading politicians' discourses, the experts have stated that

history education has been and still is politicised. Therefore, they believe that teachers should be able to help students to understand manipulative uses of history by politicians. In the opinion of experts, in Slovakia history teaching '*does not reflect much on the relations between different groups in the country, at least not explicitly. However, implicitly it teaches mostly negative content – stories on victories and oppression of a nation reproducing an image of an enemy (mostly defined ethnically).*'⁷ Consequences of such approach include a narrow perception of relations between different groups in society as exclusively a struggle for power, leading potentially to hostility and xenophobia.

Teachers' interviews in Slovakia have demonstrated that in some cases, history teachers have uncritically received political visions of the goals of history teaching as a tool of asserting the nation-state narrative.

History teaching experts interviewed for this study in the three countries have all agreed that multi-perspectivity and ability to communicate to students a critical and reflective approach to historical events and narratives should be at the core of history education. The Danish experts, when discussing the role of history education in raising critical and tolerant citizens, tend to focus more on the historical perceptions and identity of students with migration background,⁸ implicitly pointing to their 'historical consciousness' as more problematic. At the same time, Danish experts, in particular, put much emphasis on professional and didactic approach to history teaching.

Teachers in Denmark see their own role mainly in stimulating pupils' historical curiosity, developing their reflective skills, and teaching them to work independently and to use multi-perspectivity in dealing with historical materials and topics.

6 "Kauja par vesture" (Battle for history), Daily newspaper Diena // <http://www.diena.lv/dienas-zurnali/sestdiena/kauja-par-vesturi-13944410> // 28.04.2012

7 Interviews with M. Zavacká and L. Vörös, 2013.

8 E.g. A. B. Ebbensgaard (2006): *At fortælle tid*. Danske gymnasieelevers liv med fortidsrepræsentationer. Ph. D. Odense. Syddansk Universitet.

To conclude, experts in Latvia and Slovakia see a formidable challenge for history education fostering critical and reflective attitudes and promoting democratic citizenship. This challenge comes from nationalist discourses at the political level, forming a pressure that teachers as professionals dealing with history education are exposed to. The pressure on history educators could be best of all countered by professionals – researchers and didactics specialists and history teachers’ associations, however, despite their efforts and professionalism, their organisations are under-resourced.

In Denmark, experts are less concerned with the issue of nationalism, and more with the issue of professionalism of approach and ‘history didactics’. Danish history teachers do not feel pressures from politicians, and their understanding of their task as history educators is based on theory of history didactics supported by research and an existing community of practice. Nevertheless, teachers interviewed for the study often see the task of reconciling or integrating different narratives and perspectives brought by students from the immigration communities as challenging.

2.3 Students’ views

The views expressed by students regarding the goals of learning history and the influence of history education on tolerance and intolerance differ between the three countries, reflecting different kinds of consensus regarding the roles of different groups in society, but also the role of school as communicator of a state-endorsed, socially acceptable perspective on history.

Grammar school (gymnasium) students in Denmark and Slovakia have a rather theoretical and reflective perception of history teaching. E.g. gymnasium students in Slovakia find that the way history is taught in their school helps enhance critical perception of historical events and reflection on basic human values.

In Latvia, discussions with students revealed that they often find history teaching simply boring, and do not identify much with the narrative presented by teachers – largely, it seems, due to didactic challenges. Students almost unanimously conclude that history is a boring subject with many dates to be learned by heart: *“History is boring and it is just another subject that is based on learning facts. For me the hardest part is remembering correct dates, I would really need some help with that. ”This is not surprising given the thematic and factual overload of the Latvian history curriculum. No clear understanding or even a hypothetical vision of the link between history learning and tolerance or intolerance has emerged from discussion with students in Latvia.*

2.4 Conclusions

Given the growth of exclusive and intolerant political discourses in many countries, including the countries in the study, the ability of history educators to maintain a critical, reflective and democratic approach to history teaching is very important. This ability, however, depends on a number of factors, and the situation is different in Denmark on the one hand, and in Latvia and Slovakia on the other hand.

In Denmark, history teachers feel sufficiently independent to present a balanced and critical approach to history to their students, and feel that they have necessary didactic and methodological resources and sufficient time to do so. A possible area of concern, which was not raised by Danish researchers, is the insufficient representation of the perspective of teachers and parents from immigration communities on how history in a diverse society should be taught.

The situation is different in Latvia and Slovakia, where the politicians’ concept of the (ethnic and cultural) majority being the ‘state-founding’ nation exclusively defining the nature of the state, exerts pressure on teachers engaged in history education.

Such pressures do not encourage the teaching of critical and reflective approach to historical knowledge. Unlike teachers in Denmark, teachers in Latvia and Slovakia do not feel protected by a sufficient professional autonomy from immediate political pressure. Professional associations that could support teachers' critical engagement with challenging aspects of history teaching and protect their professional autonomy, are there, but they are under-resourced and do not have much political weight.

3 Recommendations

Supporting history teachers' capacity to resist political and xenophobic pressures is essential in order to enable them to continue as professionals with their task of educating critical and tolerant citizens. It is important to use flexible approach in capacity building for teachers in each country, while maintaining the common goal of empowering teachers and students.

- I. In Latvia and Slovakia, building teachers' capacity to maintain a professional and critical approach to the goals and methods of history teaching should help them to withstand pressures that seek to make history teaching a simplistic tool for imposing political ideologies.

This capacity building may include (but not be limited to):

- Trainings in media literacy and critical analysis of discourses;
- Trainings in history didactics with particular focus on dealing with conflicting historical narratives in the students' personal and school environment;
- Trainings in history didactics with

particular focus on linking history with issues of social memory and analysis of remembrance cultures;

- Trainings in history didactics with particular focus on human rights and democratic citizenship.
- II. In Latvia and Slovakia, it is also necessary to support and build the capacity of social memory researchers and history teachers' associations to become safeguards of a professional and socially responsible approach to history teaching.
 - III. It is important to continue involving the perspective of new minorities in history teaching not only at the level of students, but also at the level of teachers and other representatives of minority communities, such as parents.



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