

## TAUGHT NOT TO TRUST

### The role of civic education in shaping the political culture of Slovakia

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**Abstract** For many years, Slovakia has been struggling with low voter turnout and a disengaged public. At the same time, there are concerns that the current education system is not equipping students with skills relevant to their lives. This paper examines the passive way civic education is taught in Slovakia and the influence it has on the political behavior of youth. The paper concludes that the education also promotes a passive political culture. At the end, the paper proposes an educational reform that could improve political participation for the new generation.

### I Introduction

In the last 100 years, the Slovak nation has experienced two distinct forms of dictatorship and two attempts at democracy. The Slovak Republic has only been independent for 27 years. It is therefore not surprising that, as in other young democracies, civic engagement is lower than in established democracies. Citizens who were raised during communism were discouraged from political participation, opposition and protest. It seems that parental influences have transferred this passive approach to politics to the young generation as well. Young people

often express their views with statements such as “all politicians are the same”, “Slovakia will always stay this way”, and “I don’t understand politics and I don’t care”. This apathetic political culture halts any political change possible. While family influences and political scandals surely influence this perception of politics, civic education in schools also affects the way citizens perceive their states. What is the role of Slovak civic education in forming the political culture, especially looking at the last decade? The low level of civic education provided by the state focuses on the passive intake of information instead of critical thinking. Through this process it has perpetuated a subject-parochial political culture in the generation of today’s first-time voters.

In March of 2018, the murder of an investigative journalist sparked a wave of protests. What followed were great changes in political appointments and a revival of the civil society. People generally agree, however, that the society underwent a more fundamental change in the way citizens perceive their role within the government. This change is best illustrated by the slogan of the protests: “Who, if not us? When, if not now?” The protests inspired people to take responsibility for forming their government, instead of passively accepting its rule. To support healthy political development and achieve true functioning democracy in Slovakia, the education system should take notes from the protests and inspire civic responsibility and engagement.

This paper concerns both the field of political science and the educational sciences, and in particular the mechanisms through which these two enrich each other. It will start with a clarification of key terms and then move on to discussing current civic education in schools and the effect it has on the overall political culture. After this analysis, it will propose a reform of the current teaching methods with the aim of improving the political culture in Slovakia.

## 2 Clarification of terms

According to Pye and Verba (1969), the political development of a state is shaped by its *political culture*. Political culture connects the historical self-awareness of a nation with its citizens’ political identity and current understanding of national institutions and state power. Political culture is the paradigm through which people perceive politics within their country, as well as the arena within which the political process takes place. The level of engagement citizens feel with their country determines the type of political culture. In a parochial political culture, citizens do not feel part of the political process and do not trust the government. In a subject political culture, citizens identify with the policy and infrastructure

outcomes of politics but do not relate to the values of citizenship. A participant political culture means that citizens view themselves as actors in the policy-making process, identify with citizenship norms and are likely to influence politics either by running for office or through voting and active membership in interest groups (Pye & Verba, 1969). Almond and Verba (2016) identify the ideal type of political culture as a combination of these three, where respect for the authorities is combined with a belief that political participation is a duty. This type of political culture maintains state stability while allowing for true accountability and development of the political scene. The process of acquiring a political culture, through media, family influences and education is called *political socialization* (Pye & Verba, 1969).

Political culture is intertwined with *citizenship norms* (Bolzendahl & Coffé, 2013). These are beliefs about what it means to be a good citizen. These norms vary across cultures and regulate political behavior. Bolzendahl and Coffé (2013) point out that in new democracies, especially post-communist ones, citizenship norms are less participatory than in established democracies, as civic engagement has historically been discouraged by the previous regimes.

Education aimed at increasing knowledge of political processes is referred to as *civic education*. It is positively linked to political participation, democratic values and informed election choices. The more civic knowledge citizens have, the more likely they are to feel engaged with public life and exhibit elements of participant political culture (Galston, 2001). Civic education can be offered formally to students through the national education system as a form of facilitating political socialization.

### 3 Civic education in Slovakia

The most prevalent education method in Slovakia focuses on passive learning, memorization and lectures, leaving little space for critical thinking and innovation. The OECD Economic Survey (2004) concluded that Slovak education is so passive that it produces students incapable of solving real-life problems. Kosova (2017) asserts that Slovak teaching is too standardized and performance-oriented and that teachers' skills need to undergo significant reform towards innovation and creativity. Though the educational system is as such in need of reform, particular attention should be given to the method employed to teach civic education. Since civic education is positively linked to political participation (Galston, 2001), new democracies should promote political development by providing high-quality civic education

Civic education in Slovakia suffers from a lack of attention within education policy overall. Since 2011, the Ministry of Education has placed a much bigger emphasis on other subjects than on civics. High schools are required to administer 16 hours of foreign language classes, 11 hours of math and 8 hours of sports education (hours per week over a span of 4 years). Only 3 hours per week are reserved for civic education (Ministry of Education, 2011). Additionally, while other countries often provide civic education in a cross-curricular way or integrated into other subjects, Slovakia teaches students about citizenship exclusively through these dedicated classes (Schulz et al., 2010). The International Civic and Citizenship Study (ICCS) (Schulz et al., 2010) was a comparative study of civic education in 38 countries. Each country was surveyed on whether civic education is considered a policy priority on a scale from low to high. The Slovak Republic was the only country out of the 38 that reported this area to have no priority within the educational system. With civic education at the bottom of the priority list, it is clear that institutions do not prioritize promoting political engagement in the country.

The teaching method employed is making the situation even worse. The approach to civics seems to be the same as to chemistry or grammar – providing students with information to be memorized without requiring any critical thinking. Machacek (2013) found that almost 70% of school principals believe that the purpose of civic education is to provide knowledge about citizenship and institutions. Only 11% of principals believe this education should inspire students to be politically active. The ICCS survey (Schulz et al., 2010) shows that civic education in Slovakia places great emphasis on knowing facts and understanding key concepts. It places no emphasis on analyzing social change or providing opportunities for student engagement. In comparison, the Netherlands places only some emphasis on knowing facts about civics and a great emphasis on analyzing change and developing positive attitudes to civic engagement. The result of this difference in approach may be seen through further testing of students. Machacek (2013) found that Slovak students score highest on questions requiring memory and lowest on questions employing reading comprehension and analysis. The education attained at school teaches them about citizenship, but not towards it. The objective of the Slovak Ministry of Education has thus been achieved: Slovak students score significantly above average on knowledge about civic concepts (Schulz et al., 2010). However, this knowledge does not translate into practice. On every other area tested, ranging from interest in social issues to the likelihood of participating in protests, Slovak students scored significantly below average. This indicates that while students are able to name the constitutional rights and duties of a citizen, this knowledge does not lead them to actually exercise their rights and duties.

Civic education in Slovakia, by focusing on passive intake of information, does not lead to the true understanding of the concepts needed for informed citizenship. For example, Machacek (2013) found that students show low understanding of the division of power in a government. In a newly formed state, which struggled with the abuse of executive power for the first 5 years of its existence, this distinction should be made especially clear to students. Comparably, the findings seem to show that even the new generation still thinks within the paradigm of a communist state, as students score low when asked about the difference between a dictatorship and a democracy. Other areas about which Slovak citizens should be especially vigilant were also not deeply understood by students. The murder of the investigative journalist Jan Kuciak was linked to his exposure of the influence of financial and criminal groups on the government (Makovicky, 2018). Alarming, students performed worst on questions asking about the freedom of the press, the abuses of lobbying, and instances of corruption (Machacek, 2013). Though students are taught the theory of fair and transparent governance, when responding to the statement ‘Political leaders should not be allowed to give government jobs to their family members’, Slovak students scored significantly below the ICCS average (Schulz et al., 2010). The lack of understanding concerning institutions goes beyond the borders of Slovak national politics. Despite the fact that Slovakia is greatly dependent on the European Union for funding, 63% of Slovaks could not name a single benefit of EU membership (HN, 2019). 62% percent could not name a single disadvantage either. It seems that most Slovaks believe they would not even notice if Slovakia left the Union. Since they exhibit a similar lack of understanding regarding national politics as well, it is clear that the current approach to civic education fosters a passive relationship with the government. This leaves future citizens without the skills necessary to assess and influence political developments.

This lack of understanding impairs students’ ability to make informed political choices. Blasko et al. (2018) emphasize that democratic citizens need to possess not only the knowledge, but also the attitudes and skills needed for participation. Galston (2001) asserts that without sufficient information, a voter cannot follow policy discussions, is vulnerable to deception and is significantly less likely to participate in politics. He concludes: “Competent democratic citizens need not be policy experts, but there is a level of basic knowledge below which the ability to make a full range of reasoned civic judgments is impaired” (p. 218). The fact that this is the reality for Slovak students is well-illustrated by a quote from one of the respondents in Vilagi (2016): “I was always taught it’s important to vote, but is it better to not vote, or to vote for a candidate only because he was recommended to me by someone else? Isn’t that kind of missing the point? [own

translation]” (p. 148). Though Slovak civic education provides information on citizenship, this education does not equip young people with the skills needed for active political participation, perpetuating a passive approach to politics.

#### 4 Influence on political culture

Slovaks lack a true understanding of and show suspicion of politics. Distrust and disengagement are highly influenced by the way elected politicians perform their duties. Scandals, corruption, the breaking of promises and the abuse of power all discourage citizens’ trust towards their government. However, since distrust of the Slovak government starts at such a young age, it is reasonable to believe that civic education also affects this perception. Machacek (2008) found that 70% of students surveyed did not care about politics and that 69% did not trust politicians. Additionally, while 68% of respondents in Germany connect politicians with resolving social and international issues, 70% in Slovakia connect politicians with corruption, and 53% with empty promises (Machacek, 2008). Similarly, as the results of Shultz et al. (2010) show, students’ disinterest in social and political issues is linked to low trust in the government. In fact, Slovak students show low levels of trust towards every national institution, be it the government, political parties, schools or the armed forces (Shultz et al., 2010). Additionally, low trust was connected to low levels of political participation. These attitudes are prevalent among Slovak youth, who thus seems to exhibit signs of a parochial political culture – disengagement from and suspicion of the government.

The way students perceive politics influences their citizenship norms. Trust in political institutions is a necessary requirement for political participation (Mirazchyski et al., 2013). If students do not trust political institutions, they do not feel particularly obliged to participate in forming the political reality either. Slovaks rated conventional citizenship norms as significantly less important than students from other countries (Shultz et al., 2010). Conventional citizenship norms encompass the importance of voting, participating in a political party, following politics in the media and engaging in discussions on social and political matters. The lack of engagement is also clear from the fact that only 12% of Slovak youth participate in student organizations (Polackova, 2012). While students are aware and critical of the policy outcomes of their government, they do not identify with the citizenship values required for a functioning democracy. This perception is a sign of a subject political culture.

As a result, young people are increasingly turning away from mainstream politics and seeking alternative means of representation. A focus group study on the

political attitudes of youth showed a common theme of students losing faith that they could change something (Vilagi, 2016). A national study of the political participation of students concluded that protest is becoming the most important way for them to voice their opinions (Juventa, 2006). Desiring change and distrusting traditional ways of achieving it, students are starting to support anti-system political parties. In the parliamentary elections of 2016, the highest proportion of voters below 26 years old voted for the right-wing extremist party LSNS (Vilagi, 2016). Additionally, Struhar (2016) notes that in the past decade, the influence of right-wing paramilitary groups in Slovakia has been growing as an alternative to conventional political involvement. There have been instances of these groups giving workshops in schools and teaching young people the essentials of combat (Struhar, 2016). This shows that low trust in mainstream politics leads students to seek alternative involvement that has the potential to undermine democracy in the country.

Slovak students seem to be growing to embody a mix of parochial and subject political culture. This process is greatly facilitated by the insufficient civic education provided by the state, and the resulting lack of participation halts political development. The government is thus not responding appropriately to its citizens' need to move forward from its previous dictatorship and establish a functioning democracy.

## 5 Reform proposal

Slovakia is in need of higher political participation, which the current educational approach is unlikely to facilitate. The voter turnout in parliamentary elections has been steadily decreasing, dropping from 84% in 1998 to 59% in 2016 (Idea, 2018). Polackova (2012) notes that Slovakia is among the EU's youngest countries, as citizens under 26 years old make up 35% of the population. As such, the voters taught under the current education system will have a great influence on the country's political development in the next decades. However, it seems that this generation lacks the skills necessary for active citizenship. As the current attitudes of the youth predict their likely political behavior in the future (Bradshaw et al., 2006) Slovakia needs to undergo a significant reform of civic education if it wishes to increase political participation.

Educational reform can increase future political participation. Formal civic learning has been proven to increase political participation and engagement, foster democratic citizenship norms and increase trust in national institutions (Blasko et al., 2018). However, in order to translate knowledge into practice, pro-

vision of information must be combined with developing the right civic attitudes (Blasko et al., 2018). Therefore, in order to address the lack of trust in government and subsequent lack of conventional political engagement, the Slovak Ministry of Education should focus civics education on developing citizenship skills.

The key difference implemented by the new reforms should be a shift towards active, discussion-based learning. Machacek (2013) tested students' understanding of civic concepts when taught through lectures versus when taught through games and engaging activities. He tested both groups before and after the learning process, employing the test norms used in the ICCS survey. The experimental group employing non-traditional approaches to teaching showed a greater understanding of civic concepts than the group taught by lectures. Blasko et al. (2018) found that even if students do not fully understand the institutional mechanisms of governance, discussing relevant issues like rights and elections will lead them to develop positive citizenship attitudes. Additionally, project learning, such as explaining a political issue to the class, has been proven to foster the attitudes required for political engagement (Machacek, 2013). School curriculums should therefore give teachers more space for creativity and encourage discussion on the civic topics that students find the most relevant.

The most effective way to create the skills needed for active citizenship is with an 'open classroom' climate. The 'open classroom' approach in education is centered around discussing the questions students have in an open environment, inviting dialogue and analysis of a diversity of opinions (Godfrey & Greyman, 2014). Machacek (2013) found that this approach was the most influential in promoting citizenship values and increasing civic knowledge. Most importantly, it enhanced the students' skills necessary for active citizenship – critical analysis of social conditions and the belief that they are capable of affecting change (Godfrey & Greyman, 2014). Blasko et al. (2018) concluded that an open classroom approach in civics education enhanced trust in institutions, the likelihood to vote and tolerance towards different opinions and minorities. Teachers should therefore consider this unconventional approach, in order to increase citizenship values.

Civic education should encourage students to feel responsibility for the political developments in their country. Blasko et al. (2018) emphasize that students need to firstly believe that their actions do have a political impact; they will then feel inclined to participate in politics. Citizens have long felt detached from the Slovak government, disappointed by corrupt elected officials and lacking an understanding of democratic citizenship. However, civic engagement was reawakened in 2018, as suspicions of government involvement in the murder of a jour-



nalist moved thousands of people to protest in the streets, and many to become directly involved with politics. Speakers often ended their speeches with the slogan “We are the ones we have been waiting for”. Since the civil society has managed to incite the feeling of responsibility in Slovak citizens, the educational program should strive to achieve this too.

## 6 Conclusion

The standardized, non-interactive and knowledge-centered approach to civic education in Slovakia is maintaining a subject-parochial political culture, and as a consequence halting the social and political development of the country. Disillusionment with conventional politics and the appeal of extreme right-wing parties and paramilitary groups undermine the democratic processes in Slovakia. This reality is dangerous not only for democracy within the country, but for the stability of the whole region. The extreme right and paramilitary groups are inciting distrust of national politics, as well as of international institutions. A lack of understanding of the role of the European Union leaves young Slovaks vulnerable to deception, and many may start to feel skeptical about the EU. As two of the country’s neighbors – Poland and Hungary – are descending into a possibly undemocratic future, it is in the interest of both Slovakia and Europe to promote engaged citizenship in Slovak students. Let us hope that, along with the civil society, the educational system will take the lead in promoting citizenship values and increase participation in the new generation.

Since similar problems could be experienced in other countries, further research is recommended into the relationship between the methods employed in civic education and the political culture and citizenship norms.

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