

Reforming the History Curriculum in Poland: The Good Change Strikes Back



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"He who controls the past controls the future.
He who controls the present controls the past."

—George Orwell, 1984

DO WE REALLY NEED HISTORY EDUCATION IN SCHOOLS?

What is the purpose of teaching history in schools nowadays? This question became a central point of a debate about history education in many Western countries and is widely discussed in Poland. It is not a surprise, then, that policymakers are trying to reform the curricula to adapt to transitions in societies. We need to remember that multiculturalism, globalization, and a weakening of a nation-state are huge challenges to school systems. For instance, ethnic and minority groups in most of the Western countries want to include their cultures and histories into the school and university curricula. In these circumstances, there is no doubt that many educational systems need to be constantly ready to reinterpret the aims of citizenship and history education in the context of global and multicultural challenges.

According to the adherents of conflict theory, schools reproduce the social order and transmit the ideology of the dominant group. The education system is susceptible to political changes. Every government has its own vision of political history that gets promoted through the school system. Progressive and liberal politicians usually try to find consensus among different groups of society. The school curricula, then, in-

cludes the history of minorities, issues that are deemed controversial, and it usually promotes global and national citizenship. Conservative policymakers tend to support national history, omit disputable problems, and disseminate the idea of patriotism.

There is still a belief that history education remains one of the tools used for nation-building. Will Kymlicka (2002) points out that people as members of a particular society are "more likely to make sacrifices for others if these others are viewed as 'one of us'". If we assume that history education is one of the tools in the nation-building process, the next question worth asking is: why would citizens need history education? Keith Barton and Linda S. Levstik (2008) identify three major reasons: to develop knowledge and skills, to develop commitment, and to develop loyalty. At the same time, they also notice that it is a controversial issue whether history education "can, or should contribute to citizenship."

Hence the question, why do we need history education? Or to be precise, what kind of history education do we need? The debatable issues usually concern the amount and the balance between national and world history, which historical figures should be discussed as national he-



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roes, which victory should be promoted, and which events emphasized. The current debate on history education in many countries focuses on the key objectives of teaching as such, as well as the place of minorities in the curricula or the role of "academic history", the methods and techniques of teaching, and the role of moral learning in the history course¹ in particular.

¹ Davies, I. (ed.), (2011) *Debates in History Teaching*, Routledge; K. C. Barton, L. S. Levstik (2008) "History", [in:] *Education for Citizenship and Democracy*, (eds.) J. Arthur, I. Davies and C. Hahn, Sage, London; P. Gou-

IS CURRICULUM REFORM IN POLAND NECESSARY?

The growing body of literature suggests² that young people are not interested in studying history because they do not see the relationship between past and present, and as a consequence, they do not refer this relationship to their lives. Stephen J. Thornton states that the main goal of history education in American high schools is to prepare students for college rather than educate them³. The same situation happens in Poland, where schools put emphasis on exams, forgetting the main goal of education.

According to the critics of standardized tests, the process of learning has been reduced to the measurement of how well schools meet the state standards. The holistic development of a young person was replaced by an achievement-oriented approach expressed by test scoring. From this perspective, the school system exhibits a simplistic approach toward teaching and learning. It is necessary to equip students with the ability of critical thinking, to enable them to cope with the complexity of the world and to protect them against becoming merely the subjects of global corporations or other institutions, including the state.

The second area of criticism (in most Western countries) covers the issue of exclusion of minority groups from the official history. According to Gloria Landson-Billings (2005), official curricula "treat all students as if they were white,

nari (2008) "Unlearning the Official History: Agency and Pedagogies of Possibility", [in:] *Ideologies in Education. Unmasking the Trap of Teaching Neutrality*, (eds.) L. I. Bartolome, Peter Lang: New York.

² Noddings, N. (ed.), (2005) *Educating Citizens for Global Awareness*, Teachers College Press, New York.

³ Thornton, S.J. (2005) "Incorporating Internationalism Into Social Studies Curriculum", [in:] *Educating Citizens for Global Awareness*, (ed.) Noddings N. Noddings, Teachers College Press, New York.

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middle-class, natural-born citizens". This approach may result in a situation where the individuals who lack those features may feel marginalized and will probably never be able to develop civic virtue and identity.

From the postmodern perspective there is a perpetual and discursive struggle for the recognition of the correct version of the "truth". The conservative approach criticizes the inclusion of histories of various groups in the official curricula. On the basis of American (e.g., Gounari 2008, Hahn 2008) and British (Osler 2009) experiences we may observe that policy-makers (especially the right wing) perceive the history of a nation-state as the main source of national identity and as the very core of history lessons. Moreover, those who criticize the homogenous narrative of history and question controversial victories are accused of and labeled as being unpatriotic.

Analyzing the political debate on changes in the history curriculum in Poland, we can also observe that politicians from the right wing do not accept any "other" version of the "truth" and they are strongly convinced that "their" vision of the past is the only one to be accepted. On the other hand, politicians from the center and left have a passion for relativism and so they are sometimes losing ground and baseline pursuing the chaotic historical policy.

The last area of the criticism of history in schools refers to the teaching methods which are incapable of developing critical thinking in pupils. Young people are accused of being ignorant in the sphere of historical knowledge and it is claimed that our societies suffer from historical amnesia. The chronological narrative method cannot develop critical thinking and does not provide knowledge about

connections between the past and the present (Barton and Levisky 2008). Giving the students only facts and dates is one thing, but learning about a wider context of the problem is another. If only the former is in place, education may prove superficial.

In order to develop critical thinking among students, methods such as analyzing multiple sources, problem-solving, conflict-solving, negotiation, discussion, drama, roleplay, or field trips are recommended by experts.

HISTORY CURRICULUM REFORM BY CIVIC PLATFORM

In 2009, the Polish government introduced changes in the national curriculum for lower secondary schools (three years of gymnasium). In 2012, this was followed by upper secondary schools. It seems that policymakers have taken the contemporary criticism toward teaching history into consideration. They have paid attention to the teaching methods in order to teach students how to acquire historical thinking skills.

In 2012, there was also an attempt made to link the past with the present and to introduce critical thinking in schools – which resulted in the introduction of the approach labeled as “creating historical narratives”. More attention was paid to 20th century history, which had been treated very superficially in the former national curriculum. This part of history was therefore moved to the first year of education in the upper secondary school to ensure a more thorough analysis. So far, modern history was obligatory in the last years of education in the lower secondary school (gymnasium) and upper secondary school (lyceum). In practice, although students should learn about this period on both levels, usually, due to the fact that it was placed at the end of all



HISTORY ITSELF IS OFTEN A POLITICAL MATTER

history textbooks for the given educational stage, the students did not reach the units dealing with the most recent history as the end of the school year approached. Young people had acquired knowledge about ancient Egypt and the Middle Ages, but they have very limited knowledge of the part of history which most affects their lives. For instance, when I discussed this problem with my university students who were at school before reform, the majority of them admitted that they were interested in the history of communism and the breakdown of the regime in Poland after 1989, but they have never been taught about it in school, thus confirming the absurd organization of history in the curriculum.

However, this division was under attack in 2012 by some history teachers and opponents of the changes. They were afraid that a new curriculum would decrease the number of history hours, what did not happen. The students who choose science as their major in the upper secondary school still participate in a “History and Society” course. It is divided into nine modules which teachers can choose from, for example: “Europe and the World”, “War and Military”, “Women, Men and Family”, “Domestic and Foreign”, “Motherland Pantheon and Internal Disputes”. The teachers decide what to teach and how to teach it – they can discuss the problems throughout the ages or discuss all issues in the selected period of time. Moreover, this change gives teach-

ers freedom and possibility to cover the concerns which they are most interested in. The critics of these proposals, especially from the right wing, point out that little attention is paid to the history of Poland. According to the Ministry of National Education's officials and policymakers, the aim of the course was to show that humanities could easily facilitate the understanding of the present and recognize current problems⁴.

Before the new curriculum was introduced, a heated political debate erupted. The proposals of the Ministry were condemned and rejected by right-wing politicians and met with the approval of those in the center. Those discussions revealed that not only the history curriculum, but history itself, is often a political matter. It also showed how differently history education can be perceived by politicians from the right wing and from the center or left. From this perspective, history seems to be an ideological trick juggled by politicians. From this perspective, the curriculum content is usually politicized.

Politicians, experts, teachers, and scholars from the right wing were against the changes, especially in the upper secondary school. They did not approve of the fact that history was being divided into non-obligatory modules and that the history of Poland was merely one of the options. Moreover, they protested against linking history with social studies, maintaining that the historical knowledge would be scattered and incomplete. It is worth noting that most of those politicians are now in power.

⁴ Ministry of National Education (2012) Press notice from June 12. Available [online]: https://www.men.gov.pl/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=2979%3Adymy-do-lepszego-nauczania-historii&catid=125%3Aksztalcenie-i-kadry-aktualnoci&Itemid=76



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The proposals of curriculum reform became the central point of the media debate after the hunger strike of the former members of 1980s opposition in Cracow. Yes, a hunger strike. We witnessed the first hunger strike against changes in school curriculum in the history of Poland. The opposition stated that the new curriculum was leading to "dehumanization" and dedicated the strike to God. The protest expanded to other cities where former anticommunist activists from *Solidarność* disapproved of the changes. Most of them were not experts, teachers, or scholars. None of them were students or parents of students. If anything, they could have been grandparents⁵.

⁵ Szpunar, O. and Kuraś, B. (2012) "Głoduja dla historii, strajk dedykują Bogu", [in:] *Gazeta Wyborcza*. March 19. Available [online]: http://krakow.gazeta.pl/krakow/1,44425,11375664,Gloduja_dla_historii__strajk_dedykuja_Bogu.html

The politicians associated with the right wing, especially from Law and Justice (PiS), provided a number of arguments against the new curriculum. They had a chance to express their blind nationalistic vision on education. If we put their words into headlines, they could be summarized as “the loss of national identity”, “history is not the teacher of life anymore”, and “history education is the heart of patriotic and citizenship education”. Needless to say, right-wing politicians often have a tendency to use emotionally charged vocabulary when talking about the nation, national identity, or patriotism. The past, especially of a nation, is glorified and regarded as a matter of great importance in the conservative (republican) agenda. Law and Justice politicians also believe in the strong relationship between teaching history and building a strong nation-state. Thus, they were convinced that the reform was a threat to Poland.

An interesting view on the problem of potential weakening of our country was expressed by Jarosław Kaczyński, the leader of Law and Justice: “limiting history education is a postcolonial procedure in order to make the Polish people the labor force for the West”⁶. His argument is grounded in the premise that, due to the changes of history curriculum, Polish students will not be able to compete on the European market. Perhaps it sounds like a conspiracy theory, but it is certain that these politicians believe in what they said.

Anyway, the distinguishing feature of Law and Justice is trying to create an alternative narrative unraveling different types

⁶ Kaczyński, J. (2011) *A Letter to Prime Minister Donald Tusk*. September 17. Available [online]: <http://wybierpis.org.pl/aktualnosci/a,61,list-prezesa-pis-jaroslaw-a-kaczynskiego-do-premiera-donald-a-tuska-ws-nauczania-historii-w-szkolach.html> (Accessed 20 January 2013). Own translation.



HAVING IN MIND
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of threats Poland supposedly faces. They try to find enemies where they cannot be found, and if they fail in their attempts, they create them – a common populist practice. For instance, Ryszard Proksa, the chairman of the domestic department of education in *Solidarność* once said: “the reform of the Ministry of National Education practically obstructs the Polish students to compete on European job market. Educational system in Poland has been totally destroyed today”⁷. Accord-

⁷ Pezda, A. (2012) “System edukacji w Polsce zniszczony – związkowcy przeciw reformom rządu”, [in:] *Gazeta Wyborcza*. May 7. Available [online]: <http://wyborcza>.



ing to Ryszard Terlecki, a Law and Justice deputy and a history professor, "one wonders whether it is only the effect of incompetence, naïve light-heartedness of the Ministry of Education, or rather purposeful intention to make Polish people less competitive on the European labor market"⁸. It is, however, worth mentioning that none of the politicians explained why or how the changes in history curricula bring about lesser competitiveness of the Polish students in finding a job in Europe or elsewhere. Perhaps they only want to draw potential voters' attention using emotional language and show a false connection between historical knowledge and vocational opportunities. At the same time, they did not back their claims with any data or research which would support their statements about the connection between historical knowledge and strong nationhood.

The former Minister of Education, Katarzyna Hall, who was responsible for the introduction of the reform, posted in 2012 on her blog an entry in which she tried to defend the reform against the accusations made by Jarosław Kaczyński: "I inform you that the graduates hardly know history! They have been taught on the basis of an old curriculum which has not been changed for 12 years, as a result of which students have gross historical ignorance, especially about Poland"⁹.

pl/1,76842,11677331,System_educacji_w_Polsce_zniszczony___związkowcy_przeciw.hwtml

⁸ Polish Press Agency (2012) *Komisja edukacji za odrzuceniem projektu ws. nauczania historii*, September 13. Available [online]: <http://wiadomosci.onet.pl/kraj/komisja-edukacji-za-odrzuceniem-projektu-ws-nauczania,1,5244872,wiadomosc.html>. Own translation.

⁹ Hall, K. (2011) Answer to Jarosław Kaczyński on Katarzyna Hall's blog, September 17. Available [online]: <http://katarzynahall.blogspot.com/2011/09/jarosaw-kaczynski-broni-nieznamosci.html>. Own translation.

Jarosław Kaczyński hurried to assure Madame Minister: "If we win the elections, what I truly believe in, and if we do not change these decisions right now, we will change them then for sure. There will be normal history and Polish language curriculum equal for all students, and one that serves to build a community, common notions, culture codes, because it is more than necessary"¹⁰. And he kept his promise when Law and Justice came to power in 2015.

...AND THEN THERE CAME THE GOOD CHANGE

Education is an important issue in Law and Justice's program. The party emphasizes the role of patriotic education which should be introduced into schools from the earliest years. Having in mind that patriotism and the nation-state are the core issues of the Law and Justice program, it is not surprising that politicians condemn a more liberal approach toward history education. They also reject pluralism and recognize only one version of truth and reality. Their version.

Since they came to the power in autumn 2015, they introduced reforms which are not always consistent with the rules of liberal democracy nor common sense. The politicians of Law and Justice admit that they intend to change Poland for good and for better.

Especially the reforms in education reflecting their closed-minded vision of reality.

First, the "Good-Change Reform" in education was introduced very fast, without backing it with any empirical data or diagnosis supporting this dramatic change.

¹⁰ Polish Press Agency (2012) *Kaczyński: Polska nie chce być ani zasobem, ani kolonią*, March 29. Available [online]: http://wyborcza.pl/1,76842,11444295,Kaczynski_Polska_nie_chce_byc_anizasobem__ani_kolonia.html. Own translation.



SIMPLY PUT, LAW AND JUSTICE WANTS TO BRING BACK THE SAME EDUCATION SYSTEM AS IN THE COMMUNIST TIMES

Second, the Ministry of National Education did not discuss the planned changes enough with the interested parties (e.g., parents, trade unions, teachers, scholars). Third, the whole reform did not meet with the general approval of teachers and parents, who organized protests in many Polish cities.

The draft reform, which will be introduced on September 1, 2017, posits to abolish lower secondary school (middle school) and extend primary school from six to eight years. The education in the upper secondary schools will then last four years (now it is three years). As a matter of fact, this decision rolls back time the educational system significantly and does away with the output and achievements of many teachers, school experts, and students. Simply put, Law and Justice wants to bring back the same education system as in the communist times. The reform, which shall be completed by 2022, is perceived by most teachers, parents, experts, and scholars as an introduction of “chaos” in the curriculum itself and education system as a whole¹¹.

¹¹ Suhecka, J. (2017) “Reforma edukacji. Zamiast grafenu – przeróbka węgla. Naukowcy krytykują podstawy programowe. Czego nie nauczy nowa szkoła?”,

The experts suggest that the curriculum is not up-to-date and needs to be overhauled. At the same time, it is difficult to evaluate the proposals of the history curriculum because the Ministry of National Education made available only the draft curricula for the elementary school from the 4th to 8th grade. Judging only on this basis, at first glance the history curriculum appears to be very general and does not include any controversial issue. It is quite correct, traditional, and it emphasizes the chronological method of teaching. Due to history lessons, students are expected to develop a patriotic attitude which is supposed to be the core issue of historical education after the reform. It is not so bad as long as patriotism is not mistaken with chauvinism, racism, or xenophobia. Nevertheless, a potential threat seems to be underpinning it – the fact that history education will begin to focus on patriotism only, neglecting historical inquiry, thinking, and narrating. Developing national loyalty is not a bad idea in theory. In fact, young people must be equipped with some values to live in a complex world. However, those values should not lead to blind patriotism, chauvinism, and xenophobia. If the “Good Change” history curriculum were to contain highly selective facts and was limited to the data, the students would learn distorted history. Moreover, without developing critical and historical thinking, the young generation will be deprived of independent reasoning. Perhaps educating subdued and subordinate citizens is the goal of the “Good-Change Reform”. It would be undoubtedly compatible with the political vision of Law and Justice.

[in:] *Gazeta Wyborcza*, February 2. Available [online]: <http://wyborcza.pl/7,75398,21341358,zamiast-grafenu-przerobka-węgla-naukowcy-krytykuja-podstawy.html>; <http://niedlachaosuwszkoie.pl/index.php/74-zapasc-edukacji-skutki-deformy>



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One could have a *déjà vu* observing the heated debate surrounding the forthcoming Good-Change reform. When the education bill was adopted in the Parliament, the opposition (mainly the formerly ruling Civic Platform) cried as if it was “the blackest day for Polish education”¹². The governing party, however, frames the reform as a return to “normal Polish schools”¹³. Law and

¹² Polish Press Agency (2016) “Będzie likwidacja gimnazjów, Sejm przegłosował reformę oświaty. Opozycja: ‘najczarniejszy dzień polskiej edukacji’”, [in:] *gazeta.pl*. Available [online]: <http://wiadomosci.gazeta.pl/wiadomosci/7,114884,21121667,bedzie-likwidacja-gimnazjow-sejm-przeglosowal-reforme-oswiaty.html>. Own translation.

¹³ <http://niezalezna.pl/89948-minister-zalewska-odklamuje-medialne-informacje-ws-reformy-szkolnictwa>

Justice MP Dariusz Piontkowski, also a history teacher in a lyceum (upper secondary school), said: “We are bringing back the teaching of history. We are bringing back patriotic education”¹⁴. Well, it is not true that the former government underestimated the history course in schools. Contrary to this unfounded belief, history has been always treated with dignity and respect in Polish schools. At the end of the lower secondary education, the historical knowledge is assessed during the final exam, what is not common in other European states¹⁵.

According to Sławomir Broniarz, the President of the Polish Teachers’ Union (ZNP), “The direction that the Minister of Education proposes is a nationalist, xenophobic direction”¹⁶. He criticizes the idea of increasing the number of hours for history classes in schools. “Emphasizing history, literature, and the Polish language is essential, but these subjects cannot dominate the education system. No one has ever received a Nobel prize in Polish history! We have received Nobels in physics, chemistry, in economics – these are the most important”¹⁷ – he added. The opposition accuses Law and Justice policymakers of marginalizing science. Others go further and start to panic that we will have to move teaching the “real” history (not the version of Law

¹⁴ <http://videosejm.pl/video/16842-posel-dariusz-piontkowski-wystapienie-z-dnia-14-grudnia-2016-roku>

¹⁵ Podemski, P. (2013) “Historia dla Europejczyków? Dwa paradygmaty edukacji historycznej w Europie a nauczanie wspólnej historii”, [in:] *Historia ludzi. Historia dla ludzi*, (eds.) I. Chmura-Rutkowska, E. Głowacka-Sobiech, I. Skórzyńska Kraków: OW Impuls; J. Lorenc, K. Mrozowski (2013) “Angielski a polski model edukacji historycznej. Wybrane problemy”, [in:] *Historia ludzi. Historia dla ludzi*, (eds.) I. Chmura-Rutkowska, E. Głowacka-Sobiech, I. Skórzyńska. Kraków: OW Impuls.

¹⁶ <https://www.yahoo.com/news/thousands-polish-teachers-protest-against-education-reform-184216340.html>.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*



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and Justice) underground. The political debate has erupted again, but the actors switched roles. Those who lamented and were alarmed a few years ago now calm public opinion, while those who restrained themselves from emotional discussion are now losing self-possession.

WHAT DOES THE GOOD-CHANGE REFORM ENTAIL?

Since humanities and social sciences are equally important, it is naïve to think that the more hours of history education the students have, the better citizens they are. As it was already mentioned, there is no evidence to support this thesis. It must be borne in mind that the line between education and indoctrination can be sometimes very thin, and there is a risk that instead of history education, students would be taught a skewed nationalistic vision.

Let us emphasize that the final effects of history education depend on the teachers – how they work, what they say, what kind of ideology they bring into the classroom.

It is also important to remember that a history degree requires the holder to pursue certain methodology and objectivity. It is a matter of choice what each teacher wants to be – an independent discoverer of the past or a subjected clerk of a governing party. Therefore, it may be difficult to predict how history will be taught in Polish schools when the reform will be introduced for good.

What will certainly need to change are the handbooks. Moreover, as we already know, it will be the teachers who are to play a crucial role in selecting the historical facts and problems which shall be discussed on the basis of the newly compiled materials. Let us hope that teachers will have the possibility to discuss controversial issues as well – that they will not have to keep this knowledge under wraps. Let us hope because I personally know that this has happened before. I was repeatedly told stories by my older colleagues, relatives, and parents about the times when teachers had to whisper the inconvenient facts (from the point of view of the authorities) in the classroom or outside of school altogether (e.g., dealing with the aggression of the Soviet Union toward Poland). Back then it was the communism and not the truth that prevailed.

The first main change proposed by Law and Justice was to divide “history and society” into two separate courses. The students will start learning history in the fourth grade (no change here), focusing on different developments in Poland and elsewhere. In the following four years, they shall acquire a thorough knowledge en-

compassing the ancient to contemporary times. Right now in the lower secondary school (gymnasium), students are taught history from the ancient times to the First World War. Then they move to the upper secondary school (lyceum or vocational schools) where history from the 20th and 21st centuries is introduced.

Therefore, it is not surprising that policymakers and politicians from all political spectra would love to pursue their own historical policy by selecting facts, dates, and heroes according to their worldview. For instance, the name of Nobel Peace Prize laureate and former President of Poland Lech Wałęsa does not occur anywhere in the new national curriculum – even when the *Solidarność* Movement is mentioned. His name is also omitted in the part of the curriculum which reads: “The figures and events important for building the Polish cultural identity”. The names of renowned individuals that do appear on the list that follows include: the first king of Poland Bolesław Chrobry, Pope John Paul II, Witold Pilecki – one of the so-called “cursed soldiers”, among others. Next to *Solidarność* no name is listed, only an enigmatic and generic remark of “and their heroes”. The policymakers either left the decision of which figures to choose to a historical authority, or more probably they simply do not want to promote Wałęsa as a national hero.

Although it seems that presenting the heritage of the most accomplished Polish figures and events is a good idea, the draft curriculum does not give a complete overview. For example, policymakers for some reason failed to include in the curriculum the only victorious Polish uprising – the Greater Poland Uprising (1918-19). On the other hand, the topics which seem to be too complicated for children in elementary

school do occur – for instance, the figure of the abovementioned Witold Pilecki or the extensive details of history in the Jagiellonian era.

THE REASONS TO DOUBT THE GOOD INTENTIONS OF THE REFORM

Although it goes without saying that every government has the right to pursue their own policy toward history, especially at school, we may have serious doubts about the appropriate historic narratives in Polish schools under the government of Law and Justice. Why? Let us refer to one telling example.

Polish authorities were the organizers of the NATO Summit in Warsaw on July 8-9, 2016. The event was accompanied by an exhibition devoted to the history of Poland in NATO. It featured 14 photographs of tanks, ships, soldiers, and several politicians. Although this alone is not a reason for controversy, the individuals shown on the photos actually evoked in the public opinion a wide range of emotions. The images featured: Jan Olszewski¹⁸ (former prime minister of Poland, an icon and the hero of Law and Justice), Lech Kaczyński¹⁹ (former president of Poland), and Andrzej Duda, the current president. Clearly, the leading politicians who were responsible for introducing Poland to NATO were not included in any of the photographs and thus the role of such individuals like Lech Wałęsa, Bronisław Geremek, or Aleksander Kwaśniewski was overtly undermined, almost as if they were forgotten.

¹⁸ Jan Olszewski, an icon and a hero of Law and Justice. Although he has merits, there is no direct connection between his activities as a prime minister and the Polish accession to NATO.

¹⁹ President Lech Kaczyński died in a plane crash in 2010. He was the twin brother of the current Law and Justice's leader, Jarosław.



Though Law and Justice may not be rewriting the most recent history of Poland, they try to introduce an alternative interpretation. A false interpretation. The ruling party uses the method of history eraser – its politicians are “cleaning” the facts in a bid to change the current historical reality. To make their attempt more efficient, the best solution for them would be to set up the Ministry of Truth which would regulate and control the new historical order. But let us not give them any ideas.

Although there is a perpetual discussion about the amount of science and the humanities in the school curricula, the balance between the two is yet to be found. The latter teaches us how to think, how to draw conclusions, how to speak and even dream. If the new government wants to introduce more time devoted solely to history to schools - it is not really such a bad idea, as long as this will result in pupils acquiring a broader perspective and gain access to a bigger picture where the past meets present and future. This means that teaching history should include the history of women, minorities, controversial figures, and events. History is not only about wars (victories and failures) but also about everyday life, which is neglected in the new curriculum draft. The policymakers focused (yet again!) on military aspects and forgot about social and economic issues and inequalities and differences in the societies of the past. Moreover, the history lessons will continue to focus on heroes and not on the lives of ordinary people.

The recent debates in Poland have shown that state education and schools may easily become the instrument of political ideologies. The saddest thing is that nobody is listening to scholars, experts, and teachers who composed an extensive list of numerous errors that occur in the new curriculum

(including factual mistakes, recommendation of archaic texts for students, and a lack of different sources for students to compare)²⁰. Experts from the Polish Academy of Sciences state that “the most alarming issue is pretending that the education will change while the traditional program and the teacher-oriented approach will be reasserted. Moreover, students will be taught a subdued attitude toward authorities, past-oriented thinking, while freedom, decision-making, and building a personal system of values will be undermined”²¹.

It seems that Minister of Education Anna Zalewska has blocked her ears on any rational arguments. “I know better” seems to be her slogan. Well, as George Orwell once wrote, “ignorance is strength”.

When Civic Platform introduced the changes in curricula, their politicians also experienced some problems with communicating its purpose to the public. Although the newly introduced changes may be perceived as a good solution, in the preceding debate the Law and Justice politicians did not refer to any sound evidence or data to support their claims – instead, they chose to employ a strong, emotional appeal and a number of empty words. Thus the change in the history curriculum was neither explained nor justified to public opinion. What became evident is that education is a tool for maintaining control over the hearts and minds of the society.

²⁰ <http://www.tokfm.pl/Tokfm/7,103085,21351262,skola-ma-wykształcić-elektorat-pis-profesor-z-kul-u-mocno.html>; <http://biqdata.wyborcza.pl/czego-nauczyc-twoje-dziecko-szkola-pis-a-czego-siejuz-w-niej-nie-dowie>

²¹ Wittenberg, A. (2017) “Eksperci alarmują: MEN udaje, że zmienia podstawy programowe”, *GazetaPrawna.pl*. Available [online]: <http://serwisy.gazetaprawna.pl/edukacja/artykuly/1016450,men-zmienia-podstawy-programowe.html>. Own translation.

WHY DO PEOPLE BELIEVE POPULISTS?

Many people seem bewildered by why the clearly populist parties have been recently winning in numerous democratic countries worldwide. Why does the United States have Donald Trump, why is Poland ruled from the sidelines by Jarostaw Kaczyński, why does the United Kingdom have Nigel Farage, and why should France be wary of Marine Le Pen? The answer is a simple one: because the contemporary elites in these countries do not communicate with the masses. They do not listen to what pains them. They know better. And on top of that, they talk in their own language which does not help to garner support for their supposed knowledge. People would rather turn to those who speak their own language, who understands their fears, lifestyles, their hopes and dreams. Populists have the talent to show that they are empathetic (maybe they really are?) and that they know how ordinary people must cope with reality. The populists are strong because they do not correct people's attitudes (by calling them "homophobic" or "racist" if they are not sure about their feelings toward gay marriage or immigrants); instead, they promise to find them jobs (for example by removing immigrants). They may not care about doughnuts in school shops or about the amount of sugar children are drinking, but what they do promise is that every parent will receive financial support from the state (and thus further increase public debt, but who cares about that?). They do not condemn people if they are eco-ignorant. They promise that they will take care of every family and do not teach and preach how to be a good parent. They will remain in power as long as they can criticize Islam and do not get branded as "Islamophobic". They will have support until it turns out that they actually have nothing to offer those who believed them.

Why am I writing about this here? Well, because it is about our history. It is about the relationship between the everyday reality of an ordinary person and the decisions made by politicians. It is our life, our story, which will be history for our descendants. They will be forced to identify heroes and villains, who was right and who was wrong. But they need to have access to different sources and be able to think critically. We need to remember this now when we are making his- (or rather our-) story. History can teach how people made their decisions and how they shaped the past. That is why it is so important to show the young generation how to use different materials and sources, how to recognize alternative and false materials, how to defend themselves against manipulation and indoctrination. Unfortunately, it appears that in order to shape their prospective electorate the Law and Justice government will deprive Polish students of a basic understanding of ideas such as pluralism and freedom. ●



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