

On the Joint / Mutual Hungarian – Slovak History Schoolbook

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In the present study I intend to sum up the story of “the mutual Hungarian-Slovak history schoolbook”. First, I sum up the history of this effort, which goes back to the 1990s and sum up how it has changed during the last 20 years. Secondly, I give the reader some idea about the outcomes and results that have been developed so far within the project. And thirdly, I sum up the lessons of the project and draw up its possible future.

Part ONE: Where does the idea come from?

The idea that a particular history schoolbook could or should be written simultaneously by Hungarian and Slovak experts has been circulating among historians, history didacticians, history teachers and politicians both in Slovakia and Hungary since 1996.

The core idea originates in some Slovakian history teachers, who had realised that there was a very significant difference between the ways how history is being taught in Slovak as well as in Hungarian schools. At that time (in the 1990s) this group of whistle-blower teachers mostly consisted of such ethnic Hungarian teachers who as citizens of the Slovak Republic taught history in such Slovakian schools where the prevailing teaching language was Hungarian.¹ It is a fact that the Association of the Hungarian History Teachers in Slovakia (*Történelemtanárok Társulása*) including its leaders Attila Simon, László Kovács and myself welcomed and supported this effort as soon as 1995/1996.

The reason why it was us who realised the problem, was our very practical and almost everyday experience. As teachers in Slovak state schools we had to teach according to the Slovak state history curriculum, which put a great emphasis on the Slovak national historical traditions. On the other hand, however, as native Hungarians we insisted on teaching history that was in harmony with the Hungarian history teaching traditions. Many of us realised that our own approach was quite different from, and at certain points even contradictory to the Slovak historical perception. In other words, we observed that there was a huge gap between the historical approaches of these two nations especially in

1 In Slovakia there are some 400 elementary state schools and some 90 state secondary schools, including secondary grammar schools and technical schools, where Hungarian is the main language of teaching. All in all, some 40 000 students attend these schools, 90% of which are run/financed by the Slovak state.

schoolbooks. So it is not surprising that it was our idea to set up an expert team which was able to write a joint or mutual schoolbook, available in identical texts in both languages, that could ease the cultural tension between Hungarians and Slovaks, even if not immediately in the near future.

This all happened in the fertile mid-1990s, when in Slovakia there was a strong belief that the historical reconciliation between Hungarians and Slovaks was soon to come. It was also a time when a completely new generation of history teachers was just about to leave the History Department of the Comenius University in Bratislava. At that time, it was prof. Viliam Kratochvíl who had an utmost influence on the growing-up new generation of school teachers. His brand-name didactical approach to history, which was based on and formed by the most up-to-date German history didactics, had a fundamental influence on some of us. We knew that Viliam Kratochvíl's seminars, especially his seminars on didactical apparatus and on schoolbook analysis, meant something very new. Not only in comparison with the old fashioned teaching methods which we lived through in the late decade of Czechoslovak communism. Prof. Kratochvíl trained us in such history teaching that was humane and practical, applicable in any teaching situation where not the grand narrative of the state, but the student was in the focus. We felt that his new and modern approach to history teaching could be applied in Slovak-Hungarian relations too. And so our original intentions were strongly tuned up by his unique methods, vision and professional belief. We knew that we got something from him that could work in practice.

We were very happy, when we saw our idea of the mutual Hungarian–Slovak history schoolbook soon stepping into a new phase. Our project got an institutional form, when in 1997/1998 it got into the official programme of the Minority Institute Forum (MIF, *Fórum Kisebbségkutató Intézet*) based in Šamorín, Slovakia. From then on our project enjoyed the support of the institute and personally of its director Mr Károly Tóth. In an official document of the MIF (from 1996), the project was called “a Slovak-Hungarian experimental history schoolbook”. One year later it was already called specifically “a Slovak-Hungarian History Schoolbook”. It is worth noting that in the project description, the director of the MIF had given a detailed description of the context of the project. He wrote about the “German-French history textbook as an example”. It is also worth remembering that the director literally wrote about “a mutual schoolbook, which is based on compromises”. Mr Tóth also mentioned that besides the identical Hungarian and Slovak versions of the joint schoolbook an English language version would be necessary. As last, he indicated that “the books can be ready in the foreseeable future in September 1998”. During the 20 years that have passed since then, it has been proved that the director of the MIF was too optimistic or even wrong in some of his argumentation; though his basic vision still contains many clear-cut ideas.

Around 2005, the Minority Institute Forum stopped supporting us. It happened partially because the institution slightly changed its profile and started focusing on new social challenges. But it also happened because around that time the issue of the joint Hungarian–Slovak history schoolbook reached the highest possible professional level. This was the point when it got onto the agenda of the Inter-State Joint Committee of Hungarian & Slovak Historians lead by Mr László Szarka on the Hungarian side, and Mr Peter Zelenák, later by Mr Štefan Šutaj on the Slovak side. Since then, Viliam Kratochvíl, Attila Simon and myself have closely cooperated with the Joint Committee, providing information and expertise in the particular issue of the joint schoolbook. That was also the moment when the circle of involved experts was widened by teachers such as Mrs Adelaida Mezeiová or university lecturers such as Mr Dušan Škvarna, both from Slovakia.

The support of the Inter-State Joint Committee of Historians meant a significant move away from the original intention which has always been to provide such a joint schoolbook that could truly be used directly and effectively in schools. It has to be told that historians have not always understood teachers. It is a fact that most historians do not possess history didactical skills and therefore most of them imagine the project as a series of written scientific historical studies that can and should be read by teachers as well as by students. This erroneous idea however, does not have sense in real school practice neither in Slovakia nor in Hungary. We do understand that any successful mutual Hungarian–Slovak history schoolbook project should enjoy the consent of the elite historians in both countries. But at the same time, we think that one of the fundamental pre-conditions of such a project is to be aware of the real possibilities, the real needs and circumstances in the schools where the final outcome of the project would be used.

This gap caused by differences between two professional approaches (i.e. of historians and school teachers) has had an influence on the project for some time now. This gap also caused that the project has split into two, not completely separated but independent projects. One is an ‘official’ project of a mutual Hungarian–Slovak history book. Behind this project there are Slovak as well as Hungarian historians supported by the political elite of the two states. The second branch of the project is an ‘un-official’ group of experts who have never given up the original idea, and who have been searching for a possible solution using the most developed history didactical knowledge to apply.

One of the longest lasting features of the joint Hungarian-Slovak schoolbook effort is that experts have held numerous professional meetings, discussions, events. Even though these meetings took place on incidental basis and their personal composition has alternated time to time, yet some experts

form Slovakia and Hungary (who were keen on clearing the theoretical ways prior to the practical works) have met regularly, all in all at least on some 11 different occasions.² In fact these meetings were an important learning process that helped us to clear questions which we had not thought of beforehand.

For example in December 2000 in Pilisborosjenő (Hungary), and afterwards on April 5-6, 2002 in Piliscsaba (Hungary) the joint teams carried out a fundamental preliminary work. The main theme of these two-day-long meetings was the mutual analysis of the history schoolbooks on both sides of the state border. Some very detailed and frank analyses were given and discussed by Viliam Kratochvíl (Comenius University, Bratislava, Slovakia), Michal Lászik (Slovak Secondary Grammar School, Szarvas, Hungary), Adelaida Mezeiová (Slovak Secondary Grammar School Metodova, Bratislava), György Jakab (Állami Művelődési Intézet, Budapest, Hungary), László Kovács (Pázmány Péter Catholic University, Hungary), Barna Ábrahám (Pázmány Péter Catholic University) and Barnabás Vajda (Hungarian Private Secondary Grammar School, Galanta, Slovakia). What made these occasions even more valuable was the fact that it was a quadrilateral exchange of thoughts, where not only experts from Hungary and Slovakia were present, but members of the Hungarian minority living in Slovakia and members of the Slovak minority living in Hungary were there too.³

The main outcome of the 2002 Piliscsaba meeting was a list of recommendations on the professional and the history didactical rules according to which our history schoolbooks should be written.⁴ Among others, experts agreed on the following: (i) We are aware of the controversial influences that are present in history teaching of our states. We understand that these contradictions are results of the differences and shifts that are present in our historiographies that are present in different approaches and interpretations of the history of our shared past. (ii) We as an expert group should contribute to and aim at a situation when nationalistic bias, prejudices and mutual humiliation are eliminated from our schoolbooks. (iii) We are convinced that different or even contradictory historical positions can be taught, can be analysed and can be understood

2 Pilisborosjenő 2000 December; Piliscsaba 2003 March; Šamorín 2006 December; Košice 2008 February; Budapest 2008 May; Esztergom 2008 May; Budapest 2010 May; Komárno 2010 April; Levoča 2011 October; Praha 2011 December; Budapest 2012 September.

3 In Pilisborosjenő there were present: Peter Zelenák, László Szarka, Adelaida Mezeiová, Attila Simon, Michal Lászik, Katalin Falusi, Viliam Kratochvíl, Péter Bihari, Judit Stefány, András Nyíri, Anna Kovácsová, René Sidorov, György Himmler, László Miklós, Imre Knausz, Ágota Kaveschán, Zoltán Béres, Barnabás Vajda. In Piliscsaba there were present: Viliam Kratochvíl, Michal Lászik, Adelaida Mezeiová, László Kovács, Péter Bihari, György Jakab, Attila Simon, Anna Kovácsová, Barnabás Vajda.

4 As we know, the German-Polish joint schoolbook efforts have also produced their own conferences as well as recommendations/Empfahrungen, which were printed and circulated in large numbers among historians, schoolteachers, schoolbook editors etc.

by pupils. (iv) Any experience from the Georg-Eckert-Institut would be a very valuable contribution to our Slovak-Hungarian joint efforts. The 2002 Piliscsaba Recommendations were published in the printed press a couple of years later⁵, and they got onto the table of the Inter-State Joint Committee of Historians too.

Meanwhile, some elite historians have repeatedly confirmed their interest, openness and readiness in the “joint Slovak-Hungarian history book”. In order to confirm and strengthen this willingness for cooperation, the Slovak magazine *História* published in its 2007 November–December issue a series of interviews with six renowned historians such as Peter Zelenák, Vladimír Segeš, Attila Simon, László Szarka, Dušan Škvarna and Andrej Tóth. In the interviews, all interviewees confirmed their commitment. For example, Peter Zelenák said that “the problematic issues for historians are not the ones that draw political tensions but those which are less explored or which are diametrically differently interpreted in our historiographies”⁶.

The year 2008 was an important year for the project. This was the year when we persuaded our colleague historians, members of the Inter-State Joint Committee, that there must be some preliminary steps to be taken prior to the schoolbook. In 2008, both the Hungarian and the Slovak side agreed upon the list of authors who were going to write ‘joint essays’ on selected historical periods and events. The Inter-State Joint Committee of Historians regarded this as the first step out of three major steps leading to the final common history book. It was agreed that the first step should be a joint set of selected scientific studies on the most problematic/painful issues. This would be followed by a collection of primary and secondary sources and documents translated into both languages. Both materials could serve as a handbook for teachers, and would create a suitable basis for the third phase of the project which would be a set of practical teaching materials including a set of didactical tasks, questions, exercises based on activities dealing with sources. The whole process would be accompanied by a systematic pre- and in-service-teacher training programme in both Slovakia and Hungary.

In 2012 we took some further steps. Mrs Enikő Csukovits drew up some specific recommendations for historians, while Mr Viliam Kratochvíl outlined some guidelines for the potential schoolbook authors. Mrs Csukovits specified that “as a preliminary step towards the mutual history schoolbook, we as author historians will prepare in-depth studies in some 14 thematical topics in a form of some 14 parallel/joint studies by a Hungarian and a Slovak author each,

5 See A 2002-es piliscsabai közös tankönyv-analízis főbb tanulságai. Vajda Barnabás: Miért ne lehetne közös magyar-szlovák történelemkönyvet írni? *Eruditio-Educatio* 2, 2007/4, pp. 75-77.

6 See Anketa: Spoluzitie Maďarov a Slovákov. *História* 7, 2007/6, pp. 36-41.

possibly with a joint conclusion at the end of each study". Mr Kratochvíl gave specifications regarding the applicable teaching methods: "From the didactical point of view, we regard and understand the parallel texts written by historians as impulse for the source based work of the future joint schoolbook"⁷.

By this time we had to scrap nearly all our initial aims and methods from 1996. It was only around 2010 when we worked out the proper means of co-operation between historians and didacticians, and when we have mapped and clarified the international environment that could be of our help. Only from around 2010 we started to understand the strong duality of the task. This means that on one hand, such a project requires intensive cooperation between Hungarian and Slovak experts. Duality also means, on the other hand, a strong and unavoidable cooperation of historians with didacticians. And finally, the third most important knowledge from the decade-long process we left behind was the potential of the international professional aid we could receive. It was the Georg-Eckert-Institut on the first place, and after that the International Society for History Didactics (ISHD). These highly renowned international institutions with whom some of us (Viliam Kratochvíl, György Jakab, myself) have already been in personal contact, could provide us extremely valuable expertise.

Part TWO: What have we got now?

As I see it now, quite a lot of positive things have happened since our first efforts. Since then, László Kovács and Attila Simon have published their history schoolbook which in a certain way is unique in our geographical area. Not because it was published in Hungarian language in Slovakia. But because as a schoolbook written for the Hungarian minority living in Slovakia, this book (in fact a series of 3 schoolbooks and workbooks) reflects very modern didactical developments à la Viliam Kratochvíl. It is not accidental that these books have been praised a couple of times for their modern methodological approach, including their multi-perspectives. Another result is that in 2005 Mrs Adelaida Mezeiová developed and introduced a new teaching model in her school in Bratislava, a so called alternative history teaching model which was officially confirmed by the Slovak Ministry of Education. Parallel with these efforts, some steady changes took place in the Slovakian school leaving exams ("maturita"). Thanks to Viliam Kratochvíl, we can observe a move from the memory-based history learning, since Slovakian teachers now are expected to prove their

7 On March 3, 2008 there were present: László Szarka, Enikő Csukovits, György Jakab, Viliam Kratochvíl, Attila Simon, Barnabás Vajda. See Enikő Csukovits: Szempontok a szlovák-magyar közös történelmi kézikönyv készítéséhez. Manuscript. See also Viliam Kratochvíl: Inakosť spoločných dejín v časopriestore Karpatskej kotliny. Projekt slovensko-maďarskej komisie historikov na výučbu dejepisu pre stredné školy. Manuscript.

students' skills at the school leaving exams. It is true however, that all these efforts were isolated attempts, while nobody had the power to disseminate these newest developments, including the new school leaving exam, which was not properly communicated with teachers.

While these efforts did not call any big professional reflexions or much interest in the wider public, much more attention was devoted to 'official' efforts. The group of historians enjoying institutional and political support have been working on pair or joint historical studies for some 3-4 years now. And even though their prestige has helped to keep our case in the mainstream, yet they are clearly struggling to overcome the traditional limits and prejudices between the representatives of the two historiographies. Since these pair-studies have not been published yet, we can only ask: Will there be a link between the 14 pair studies? Will there be a joint conclusion at the end of each? From unofficial backstage information we have heard that some parallel studies will not communicate with each other. In fact, they keep themselves away from each other, and simply do not even solve basic terminological problems, such as the difference between terms '*Magyar Királyság*' (Hungarian Kingdom) or '*Uhorsko*'. We understand that the pair studies of historians do not want to persuade each other; and that they certainly did not want to push each other to forced joint conclusions. However, I think that already the fact that the pairs accept each other's historical interpretations is a minor progress in the whole process. The original deadline for the book was the end of 2011; in October 2012 we are still looking forward to see it.

Since 2002, the group of history didacticians have developed two Modules: Module No. 7 on the Trianon Treaty, and Module No. 10 on the post-1945 Central Europe. What is a Module? This term was created by György Jakab who was the first to question the genre of the planned mutual history book seriously. The content of the Modules were specified later. Since 2002 we who cooperated in the realisation agree that we would like to create a set of comprehensive teaching materials, modules. In practical terms a module is a set of inquiry based activities that are based on the analysis of primary historical sources. Modules are based on the most progressive didactical approaches such as multi-perspectives and enquiry based learning. We think that the future joint mutual history schoolbook should reflect more than one historical position. Modules serve as a careful collection of sources, which reflect different, sometimes even contradictory historical approaches and positions. We certainly know that such a schoolbook is still a rarity in Central Europe. As Falk Pingel stated it correctly: "In East Europe practically there are no plural and multi-perspective history schoolbooks. Instead, books offer a closed historical perception." In the analytical part of the Modules any comparison or interpretation of the sources is supported by intentionally emphasized didactical apparatus, i.e. questions, tasks, exercises.

We are convinced that the joint/mutual Slovak- Hungarian history schoolbook has to be a modern schoolbook oriented on the development of skills. At the same time it has to fulfil its utmost pedagogical goal, i.e. improve the historical empathy of the pupils.

What does this mean in practice? In technical terms, Module 7 and Module 10 both exist in paper versions, to date only in Hungarian language. They both consist of a set of some 12 to 14 lessons, 45-minute-long each. Both Modules exist in two versions. Version one is the Students' Book, containing many didactically designed sources, plus many analytical-synthetical questions, tasks, exercises. The whole didactical apparatus was carefully planned from taxonomical point of view.⁸ Version two is the Teachers' Book. The main difference between them is that this one contains not only the solutions to the questions and the tasks, not only the concrete or probable solutions and photocopyable materials, but the Teachers' Book contains the necessary methodological descriptions of the teaching activities too. All in all, both books can be useful and practical tools in a very intense and active learning process between teachers and students. The main goal of all questions, tasks and exercises is cooperation, mutual creative work, and intense formulation of thoughts. Since there are many tasks for fact-based argumentation, our Modules are more suitable for fruitful reasoning than examination. Originally we designed both Modules as classical schoolbooks or rather exercise books. Today, after having seen the success of digital whiteboards we have already transformed our .doc or .pdf materials into digital ones.

How do we know that our Module schoolbooks can be applied in praxis? Well, both Modules have been tested during pilot testing in seven different schools both in Hungary and Slovakia. In the summer of 2012, they were also tested by a group of 24 active school teachers who unanimously confirmed their practicability.

Why is multi-perspectivity so important for us in this project? I would like to state that the multi-perspective approach – which is fundamental in any free historical research as well as in any history teaching which regards itself as modern – is not equal with the loose relativisation of the historical truth. The multi-perspective method in any research or in any teaching procedure does not put the historical truth in a loose position which would mean that any historical event, personality etc. could be interpreted totally freely, for example

8 We have published some excerpts form our Modules. See: Jakab György–Vilám Kratochvíl–ifj. Lator László–Vajda Barnabás: Magyar és szlovák történelemtanárok együttműködése. *Történelemtanítás* XLV, 2011/3. Online: <http://www.folyoirat.tortenelemtanitas.hu/2011/10/jakab-gyorgy---ifj-lator-laszlo---vilam-kratochvil---vajda-barnabas-magyar-es-szlovak-tortenelemtanarok-egyuttmukodese-02-03-05/> [2012.4.21.]; also Jakab György–Vilám Kratochvíl–ifj. Lator László–Vajda Barnabás: Trianon több szemszögből. *Új Pedagógiai Szemle*, 2009/2, pp. 76-94. Online: <http://www.ofi.hu/tudastar/jakab-gyorgy-kratochvil> [2012.9.17.]

with neglecting some facts or not considering moral values. Rather than this, multi-perspectivity is a firm intellectual basis and a control tool which regards other people's views as legitimate. Multi-perspectivity means conscious tolerance toward other people's views – it means being open to listening to them, or even ready to accept them if persuaded. A beautiful truth is hidden in the depth of multi-perspectivity: any participant of any debate on any historical event has the right to contribute with his own position in order to achieve the historical truth. And so together, all the members of such a discourse, collectively contribute to a deeper and more valid historical truth. Robert Stradling beautifully describes this kind of truth when he writes about “a more complex account of history” which can be obtained from such a really multi-perspective approach. As he continues: “It is important to understand why multi-perspectivity also requires an analysis of how the different perspectives relate to each other and a recognition that each perspective is part of something bigger: a more complex but also more complete picture”⁹.

Part THREE: What are the conclusions about the future of a mutual history schoolbook?

My optimism originates from two main sources. First, from the evaluations of the events that have taken place since 1996. I see many significant efforts that have been made by cutting-edge historians and history didacticians both on the Hungarian and the Slovak side. In my opinion, a “mutual Hungarian-Slovak history schoolbook” should be a specific workbook supported by a teacher's book in paper and also in a digital format. Apart from the most up-to-date historical knowledge, it would be based on more effective didactical methods such as multi-perspectivity and the confrontation of different kinds of sources, while all activities would be done and understood in an open and empathetic interpretation field.

The challenge of a “mutual Hungarian-Slovak history schoolbook” might seem rather high, and there is no guarantee for success. Yet, I firmly believe that it is possible to write such a joint history schoolbook. It is a fact that despite the involvement of numerous experts on both sides, no breakthrough happened in this issue till now. But on the other hand many partial tasks have been completed, and in comparison with the very beginnings in the 1990s, we are now aware of the advantages, the challenges, and the traps of such an endeavour.

⁹ Stradling, Robert: *Multiperspectivity in history teaching: a guide for teachers*. Task Force Education and Youth. Strasbourg, Council of Europe, 2003, p. 19., 21.

We know that the German-French mutual history schoolbook had been prepared for many decades too. We do know that the correct mapping of the possibilities, needs in realities is essential. We do understand which practical problems have to be solved.¹⁰ We know that getting rid of nation-based history teaching is not an easy task in any of the countries being involved. We know that modernity in our context does not mean new topics in our shared history but rather new teaching methods and approaches in disseminating relevant historical knowledge. We know from some international experiences such as the Georg-Eckert-Institut für internationale Schulbuchforschung that by patient work, focused knowledge and social support the target can be reached. Surely, some supportive sub-projects involving Hungarian and Slovak students beyond the mutual history schoolbook would be essential, and we are surely missing the firm political backing and some symbolical gestures from politicians on both sides. However, we believe that our project can contribute to the general didactical renewal which is needed in our Central European region.

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¹⁰ Just two technical problems from the many which arouse from the structural differences in the history teaching of the two countries involved. There is a major difference in the history curriculum that history is a compulsory subject in Hungary with a final exam at the end of it; in Slovakia it is an optional subject. Another example of disparity between the two states is that in Hungary there is a free market of schoolbooks, but in Slovakia nothing like this exists. In other words Hungarian students can choose from a great variety of history schoolbooks and they have to pay for them, while in Slovakia there is only one history schoolbook written for each grade year, and it is free of charge.

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