FOR GOD AND FOR NATION!
THE IDEOLOGISATION OF SCHOOLS AND EDUCATION UNDER THE CHANGING RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CHURCH AND STATE IN SLOVAKIA

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Abstract: The present study analyses education policy in Slovakia and determines the role of the church in education governance and the church–state relationship in education policy. The church–state relationship is also evident in the specific constellations of the national curriculum. The study highlights the de-secularisation trend in education policy and curricula and identifies the links between religious and nationalist education content, which are largely a relic of the historical (and controversial) era of Slovak statehood building. It also analyses Ethical Education, which is a specific (and internationally unique) school subject in Slovakia that has been shaped by a particular church–state 'ideological governing form'.
Key words: Slovakia, state education, church, ideological governing form, nationalism, curricular ideologies

Introduction

Slovakia is a country with strong Christian roots and a mainly Catholic population (according to the most recent population census, only 13% of inhabitants are not religious and 62% are members of the Roman Catholic church). Compared to the Czech Republic, with which Slovakia has shared a state at various stages in its history, religious life is much more localised in Slovakia. For example, during the Communist era, dissent in Slovakia was concentrated in religious circles, while in the Czech Lands it was mainly found in intellectual and artistic circles. In 1993 the two countries went their separate ways and since 2004 both have been members of the European Union. Since the fall of the Iron Curtain relations between the state and the churches have been standardised and church schools have sprung up.

A glance at the proportion of pupils in church schools from 1991 to the present day gives us an idea of church priorities in the Slovak education system. In the decade from 1991 to 2000 preschool (ages 3-6) and primary schools (ages 6-15) were not a priority. Even by

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2000 only 4% of pupils were studying at church primary schools, which is just over 2.5% more than in 1991. During the same period there was a 10% increase in pupils studying at church gymnasiums (grammar schools, ages 15-19), with almost 13% studying at church gymnasiums in 2000 (5% in other private secular gymnasiums). In 2010 the proportion of pupils at church preschools was less than 2% (the same figure applies to other private secular preschools), while the percentage at church primaries was 5% (less than 1% in other private secular primaries). Pupils at church gymnasiums accounted for almost 16% (5.5% in other private secular gymnasiums). In the pre-pandemic year (2019) growth in pupils attending church preschools and primaries was around one percent. The proportion of pupils studying at church gymnasiums was 17.5% (6.8% in other private secular gymnasiums). Interestingly, in other higher secondary schools (secondary vocational schools; vocational schools) the proportion is greater in private secular schools (12.1% of pupils in 2019 compared with 3.5% of pupils in church schools).

These statistics show that since the legalisation of church schools the priority of the churches has by and large been higher secondary education, through the provision of elitist secondary schools. In terms of results there is pressure to achieve excellence, particularly in the national testing (T5 – national testing for year 5 pupils; T9 – national testing for year 9 pupils; the *maturita* secondary school leaving certificate), where many of the church schools perform well.

Hence the church schools have successfully adapted to the education market and neoliberal ranking mentality and this is evidenced in their attempt to attract pupils on the grounds of excellence. The church schools compete with both the state schools and the private schools over pupil admissions. They have deliberated invested in creating symbolic added value – compared to the state and private schools they have a specific value set that corresponds to traditional religious values (Spalová & Lukeš Rybanská, 2021).

Burke (2012, p. 186) notes in this context and with reference to the United States that Catholic schools' move

> to embrace neoliberal reform policies and to engage in a competitive model with public schooling is to actively do a disservice to a large swath of the population, and most particularly to the poor and the dispossessed, the least well served;

Nonetheless, efforts to make education more exclusive and elitist may not be the most distinctive aspect of church schools. After all, these schools are able to build their unique culture around other value dimensions. Some scholars point out that an excessive focus on market competition can deter schools from their pursuit of social inclusion and support, which are the cornerstone of religious value systems (Bryk, Lee & Holland, 1993).

Church schools are, however, more strongly tied to the competitive education market under the specific nature of education governance in Slovakia. While Slovak schools are decentralised insofar as school sponsors are concerned, curricula are strongly centralised: the national curriculum is managed and developed by state bodies and applies at each education level (Kaščák, 2021). The state bodies also largely determine textbook policy. Slovak schools are typically administered via national central norms and legislation. Church (and other) schools therefore largely build their distinctive identities at the extracurricular level.

Historical context

The relationship between church and state in Slovakia is complex and often controversial. The past has left its mark and continues to exert an influence (symbolically and technologically) on public affairs. The first controversial marker is the role of the dominant Catholic Church during the Second World War, the holocaust and the fascist Slovak State (1939–1945). The close links between Hlinka's Slovak People's Party (later banned) and President Tiso (ultimately condemned) led—at least in the eyes of the public and post-war political leaders —to a blurring of the 'dividing line between the Catholic Church and political Catholicism' (Moravčíková, 2014, p. 48). At this time, the Slovak State was responsible for adopting anti-Jewish legislation and for mass deportations. Moreover, President Tiso, a Catholic Priest, did not respond to the many protests emanating from the Holy See and defended the anti-Jewish measures. The societal trauma did much to weaken the willingness to award greater autonomy to church affairs in Slovakia and give the church more independence. The Communist Coup of 1948 further reinforced this political attitude as the distrust took on a new totalitarian ideological flavour.

The clamp-down on religious freedom under the Communist governments (1948–1989), the persecution of religious people and church officials, the imprisonment and sometimes brutal treatment of church representatives all left their mark on church life in Slovakia and added to the atmosphere of distrust between church and state. The situation came to a head in 1950 with the launch of Operation 'K' (*kláštor* means monastery), in which the monasteries were abolished, and the monks forcibly transferred following the first court trials of the heads of the various orders. They were tried in kangaroo courts, accused of treason and spying for the West. The church responded by going underground and engaging in dissent. A secret church was set up as an education platform outside the control of the state and the threat of state persecution (Kudláčová, 2021). Meanwhile the state attempted to squeeze out and replace the traditional formational church rituals with similarly structured secular rituals based on political ideology (for example Confirmation was replaced with the Oath of Loyalty to the Ideas of Marxism-Leninism – Kaščák & Pupala, 2018). This was done because the church rituals were maintained, mainly in the Slovak countryside, taking place in families and communities.

As a result, after the fall of the Iron Curtain (1989) there was public interest in separating church from state. But this was never fully achieved. Instead the churches have remained reliant on state funding and the state exerts further control by distinguishing between registered and non-registered churches, among other things. "The persisting economical connection to the state budget, the contractual state-church relations, and distinguishing between registered and non-registered churches have been sporadically evaluated as a regulation of religious life and anachronistic state policy..." (Moravčíková, 2015, p. 616).

Unsurprisingly (given the strong undercurrent maintaining church life in Slovakia and the democratisation processes) the church–state relationship was reinstated following the fall of the Iron Curtain. Although the relationship was not one of two equals—especially in terms of governance, where the state had a more powerful role—in ideological terms their powers gradually became more balanced.

Immediately after the fall of the Iron curtain the school system was opened up and church schools were introduced. This was a key part of the policy to democratise society. Under Article 24 of the Slovak Constitution, churches and religious communities can provide religious tuition, while Law no. 308/1991 states that religious people have the right to receive and provide religious education, providing they follow the rules of the churches and the law (Šmid, 2011). Hence conditions were laid down for the equal functioning of church schools in (Czecho)Slovakia in 1991.

This historical snapshot captures two consecutive extreme positions of church-state relations in one country. The political Catholicism of the fascist Slovak State (which initiated and carried out harsh repressions against Jewish inhabitants) is an example of the politicisation of the church as a key element in the struggle against the depoliticisation and social and political ostracisation of the church in the Communist era in the face of the 'state's aggressive propagation of scientific atheism' (Hann, 2010, p. 12), carried out mainly through the education institutions and the curriculum. One of the most important challenges after 1989 was the 'normalisation' of church-state relations and integration into the political structures and education process.

The present study is an analysis of the reconstruction and reconstitution of church-state relations following the Soft Revolution in Slovakia in 1989 as seen through the prism of education policy, education, the schools and the curriculum. Although the reconstruction bears all the hallmarks of the post-socialist transformation in general, it also shows that the Slovak case is in many ways unique, owing to the specific ideological and political constellations in the country. The study also contributes to expanding knowledge on the forms of 'postsocialist nationalism', which in the context of the peaceful dissolution of Czechoslovakia have not attracted as much analytical attention and are infrequently discussed internationally (Hann, 1998, p. 841).

Conceptual framework of the analysis

When analysing education policy and how it ties in with the constellations of the church-state relationship, the key questions naturally concern social power, power relations and the actors. In our analysis on education three power sources intersect – political power, economic power and ideological power. Although power sources are important, we agree with Laursen (2006, p. 276) that

> The power sources behind the educational system and behind the role of education in the labour market are primarily political and economic. But the political and economic powers in education are ultimately dependent upon ideological power: only ideological power can make students learn.

Our analysis therefore depicts the Slovak constellations of the political and party structures shaping education processes, but as Laursen points out, one should not underestimate the political power exerted over education and so attention must primarily be paid to the ideological aspects of politics. Of course, both political and ideological power can overlap in education and in many cases does. In these cases one can talk of 'ideological governing forms'. "Ideological governing forms encapsulate the direction of norms, values,

beliefs and behaviours that should permeate society at a certain point in time and decide what should be defined as desirable and undesirable in education" (Simmie & Edling, 2016, p. 1).

The overlap is typical in analyses of the influence of desecularised education policies on education processes and the curriculum, so these will also feature in our analysis. In education analyses in other contexts other types of governing forms may dominate. Simmie and Edling (2016, p. 2) talk of the legal form, economical form and governing through control.

Ideological and political power are not the same thing. As Laursen (2006, p. 278) states "political power is territorialised whereas ideological power often spreads and transcends political boundaries". Ideological power can, unlike political power, be disseminated through different organisations, mass media and religious organisations, or it may be anonymous or diffuse. Ideological power therefore has a wider radius of action. In education analyses this type of power applies particularly in the school curriculum and curricular policies. A substantial section of our analysis will therefore consist of a curricular analysis of the relevant education areas in which church-state relations are manifest and in which religious and nationalist content is discussed.

In doing this we take account of Eisner's (1994) classification of curricular ideologies. Eisner lists six curricular ideologies in education: religious orthodoxy, rational humanism, progressivism, critical theory, reconceptualism and cognitive pluralism. These may be overt or latent and can co-exist in school settings, with different teaching areas drawing on different ideas and assumptions. However, there are limits, or vulnerable spots, as to how far they can co-exist. The diversity and coexistence of curricular ideologies can indicate an open education system (including education content) and is therefore a sign of democratisation. Hence the relevant education areas are viewed from this perspective on the Slovak context as well.

Political and ideological powers

After the fall of the Iron Curtain the state adopted a generally positive attitude to the churches, which went hand in hand with the restitution of the churches' political power and the emergence of Christian political parties and politicians with close links to specific churches and religious faiths. Church politics (primarily Catholic) began to take root in both the political sphere and in public affairs. That is why there is a period in recent Slovak history in which the priority was to view public matters and societal events through a religious prism, including in education. This period was generally associated with the presence of Christian conservative political groups in the governing coalitions. But interestingly many of the measures and policies promoted and introduced by these groups have never been questioned by parties of a different ideological bent.

The religious and national perspective in education policy reached a height in 1994–1998, 2002–2006 and 2006–2010. In these periods education policy was in the hands of Christian conservative or nationalist governing parties. In 1994–1998 and 2006–2010 it was under the control of the Slovak National Party (SNS) and in 2002–2006 the Christian Democratic Movement (KDH). In these periods education policies were proposed and

approved that largely determined the role and status of the church and religious and nationalist teaching content in Slovak education.

However, the church and state, as represented by the official education policy, cannot be seen as two separate entities determining the nature of the religious and nationalist teaching content. At that time the dividing line between the two stakeholders was opaque. Hence it would be more accurate to talk of a common church and state education policy created by a specific "ideological governing form" (Simmie & Edling, 2016) in which political and ideological power overlap.

As this is a value-based type of governance, education policy requires a certain degree of stability for the basic idea framework to be accepted country-wide and the values to be accepted. In the key periods noted above the governments can be considered relatively stable, given Slovakia's political history, and able to govern for uninterrupted periods, especially when compared with the periods in which the education ministry was in the hands of parties subscribing to a different ideology.

Religion and Postsocialist nationalism

The first period with such a governing form was when the SNS was in power (1994–1998); it was also the most controversial era in terms of the ideologisation of education. In this era the ideological governing form was pure because the ideological content had not been implemented into the education sector through legislation but through specific steps taken by state bodies. The 'legal governing form' therefore had a restricted field.

The strong nationalism, associated with the need to consolidate the identity of the young Slovak state, led to support for nationalist measures in schools and a deterioration in relations with both Hungary and the Hungarian minority in Slovakia. This was caused by the suppression of national minority language use in general education, the bolstering of the status of the state language in schools and the phasing out of bilingual reports. But the ideologisation did not just affect the education system, the school curriculum also changed. The most well-known controversy was over the history curriculum, particularly the role of the church in the war-time Slovak State and the collaboration with the Nazi regime. Some historians nostalgically associate the roots of Slovak statehood with the fascist state run by church officials. For instance, in some historical writing and textbooks a conciliatory tone is adopted when describing the Slovak State and its role in the holocaust.

> Political elites demanded the reconstruction of the national past in line with the rising nationalism and isolationism of the first half of the 1990s, and sought those presentations of Slovak history that were believed to legitimize the newly established state. (Otčenášová, 2015, p. 31)

The controversy was inflamed by the publication of Ďurica's *Dejiny Slovenska a Slovákov [A History of Slovakia and the Slovaks]*. The book, written by a nationalist historian living in exile, was criticised by a large number of academics, especially ones based at the Institute of History at the Slovak Academic of Sciences. Under the SNS, the book was put on the school history syllabus in the mid-1990s without it having been officially approved. It is still used in some schools today. "The majority of historians saw the textbook

as the revival of historical myths and as the promotion of a negative stereotyping of others (Hungarians, Czechs, Jews, and non-Catholics in general)" (Otčenášová, 2015, p. 31).

Despite a number of the book's premises being refuted by experts, some later textbooks were based on it. An example is Letz's textbook for year 3 gymnasium pupils. Letz was particularly active when the education ministry was in the hands of the KDH and SNS. And also when the SNS chaired the History Subject Commission, the national commission responsible for the history syllabus. Letz's textbook contains passages from speeches by J. Tiso, the controversial Roman Catholic priest and prime minister of the Slovak war-time state and later the president of the war-time Slovak Republic. It contains two extracts from his defence before the National Court in March 1947, when he was sentenced to death for treason, but there is no accompanying explanation. Moreover, the term fascist Slovak state is not used in the book, with the 'New State on the Map of Europe' being the preferred phrase (Bučeková, 2016). Another problem with some Slovak history textbooks (especially those for younger pupils) is that they barely mention the ethnic diversity of Upper Hungary in the middle ages and early modern period, instead the focus is on the 'Slovak' population, despite the difficulties of using the term 'Slovak' with any accuracy in relation to this era (Chorvátová, 2017). The ideologisation of the history taught in schools remains an issue today.

According to Rothgangel (2021, p. 16) the period of postsocialist statehood building and the search for identity laid the foundations of the collective awareness of the Visegrad countries and "...at present they tend to favor a strong national identity, an exclusive interpretation of Christianity, with prejudice against minorities such as Jews being quite common". This means that the nationalist images in the collective conscience of Slovaks are stable and cannot be simply ascribed to the ideologisation of the curriculum in the 1990s. Besides, the 'ideological governing form' of this era there were, and still are, other ideological powers operating in Slovak reality that lie firmly outside political power. It should be noted that often religious organisations or church discourses further disseminate these images. Hence one can say that in the remainder of the era ideological power was re-politicised.

Recent developments in Central and Eastern Europe, particularly the salience of nationalist and populist agendas at the highest levels of politics in Poland, Slovakia and Hungary since their entry into the European Union as well as the growing popularity of neo-fascist movements, confirm the need for a better understanding of popular mobilization at the grassroots. (Buzalka, 2010, p. 57)

Desecularisation of the school system

After the millennium and the politics of the mid-1990s based on ideological power, Christian conservatism was propelled to the centre of official school policy (political power) and was implemented via legal governing forms. This change fundamentally altered the status of the church and religious education in schools. At that time the education ministry was headed by a KDH nominee. The main tool of this governing form was the ratification of the Treaty between the Slovak Republic and the Holy See on Catholic Upbringing and Education (2004), which drew on the Basic Treaty between the Slovak Republic and the Holy See. The

Agreement between the Slovak Republic and Registered Churches and Religious Societies on Religious Upbringing and Education (2004) was also signed in this period.

Under the treaty and agreement, religious education was made an 'elective mandatory subject' in all schools. That meant that all pupils had to choose one of two subjects as part of the People and Values education area – either religious education or ethical education. These days pupils make their choice in the first year of primary school and have at least one lesson per week in their chosen subject throughout primary school. State and church schools were also put on an equal funding footing—for instance under the Treaty between the Slovak Republic and the Holy See on Catholic Upbringing and Education Catholic schools receive the same amount of funding as other schools. The treaties and agreements thereby led to a specific model of education policy, under which

> mutual cooperation and separation between church and state are required: whereas the state facilitates RE in its schools (e.g., by making room for RE in the curriculum, by offering the required infrastructure, and by paying RE teachers), the Church (i.e., a delegation of local bishops) is responsible for the content and inspection of the school subject. (Franken, 2021, p. 6)

Not only were church schools given autonomy and equal funding, but religious content also became part of compulsory education in state primary schools. The schools also followed a separative confessional model (Alberts, 2019, p. 57), in which teaching is organised by religious communities with exclusive responsibility for religious education while the class is separated when it comes to education about religion. This is both one of the most clear-cut and most common models of religious education in schools in Europe. Other models are the mixed model in which the religious communities and the state have shared responsibility, or the state organised model of religious education, which is largely non-confessional (Schreiner, 2013).

The statistics on how widespread religious education is in Slovak schools tell us something about the collective conscience and the Slovak pupil population.

> Of all pupils in Slovakia's primary and secondary schools, 71% attend RE classes. The largest percentage attendance at RE classes can be found in the eastern Region of Prešov in the east of the country (almost 88%), whereas in the capital Bratislava only around 52% of pupils are taking the subject. This means that rural infrastructures still result in higher rates of participation in RE, while participation is lower in the major cities. (Reimer, 2016, p. 235)

Hence we can see that a separative model of religious education dominates in all regions of Slovakia. The political and societal influence of the church grew after the signing of the treaties with the Vatican. Since then, Tížik (2005, p. 16) argues, Slovakia has tended to de-laicise:

> one can talk of desecularisation (in the sense of the rise in church membership reported in the census and the growing proportion of those who believe in God, according to representative surveys such as EVS, ISSP etc.) and (particularly after the signing of the Basic Treaty with the Vatican) of delaicisation as the weakening of state power and the strengthening of the church's power over society.

Hence it is not surprising that in the People and Values education area taught in schools the dominant curricular ideology is what Eisner (1994) calls religious orthodoxy.. It has its own discursive boundaries. Sex education and multicultural education are out of bounds, for instance, which Eisner suggests can be seen as problematic or problem-free depending on the curricular ideology. While it is usually obvious which ideology underpins religious education, in other subjects it need not be so clear-cut.

> Ideologies also function in much subtler ways. Often they do not announce their positions on important educational matters; rather, they manifest themselves in the kinds of language that imply or suggest rather than state explicitly what is educationally important and what the schools' curricula should address. (Eisner, 1994, p. 49)

When dealing with latent ideologies both the theoretical background and persons involved in curricular policy and education content have to be analysed. One would expect the ideological basis of ethical education to differ from that of religious education. Given the democratisation of public education one might expect that opportunities to identify with other world views as well would be provided. But in Slovakia's case the situation is complicated.

The genesis of ethical education as a school subject

In the Slovak school curriculum value orientations are covered under *People and Values*. This education area is taught in *ethical education* and *religious education*, which are elective mandatory subjects. The child's parents choose one or the other. Initially then the school curriculum appears to offer balanced pluralist value frameworks. Parents who are more atheist than religious in the classic atheist sense will naturally expect a different perspective to be taught in *ethical education*. However, they may be surprised by what a more detailed analysis reveals.

The ethical education that is taught in Slovakia is based on the American *Character Development Project* (associated with E.A. Wynne, K. Ryan, T. Lickon) and the *Child Development Program* (by D. Solomon, D. Watson, V. Battistich) (Baďurová, 2019; Kaliský, 2009). These then fed into Spanish psychologist R. R. Olivar's research in the 1980s that identified 10 personality characteristics in 14 to 15-year-old pupils that influence the formation and maintenance of healthy interpersonal relationships. In the 1990s Olivar's work was the inspiration for an experimental ethics subject developed by the Slovak L. Lencz, along with extensive support materials (Lencz, 1993a, 1993b; Lencz, Krížová, 2004). The subject was supposed to be piloted in two hundred schools with staff that had been trained by Olivar and Lencz (Fridrichová, 2012).

However, the experimental subject was never evaluated and in 1993 the political decision was taken to introduce ethical education as an alternative to religious education. No analysis has ever been conducted on whether the ethical education still being taught today has the potential to fulfil the bold and challenging aims.

Ethical education was made an elective mandatory school subject for lower secondary pupils (primary year 5 and lower secondary years 6 and 7) in the 1994/1995 school year. In September 1998 this prosocial subject was introduced into preschools and then in the

2004/2005 school year ethical education became an elective mandatory subject at the primary level. Ethical education is now taught as an elective mandatory subject from year 1 to year 11 and "according to various statistics on the subject, around 20–30% of pupils attend ethics education classes. In grammar schools, this figure rises to up to 50% of pupils" (Reimer, 2016, p. 237).

The concept of prosociality

When R. R. Olivar decided to focus on experimental psychology and pedagogy he obtained sufficient empirical data to create a theoretical model. In so doing he introduced the term prosociality and identified appropriate methods and topics that could be used to foster positive social behaviours. The theoretical model contains the 10 factors mentioned above (Olivar, 1992) which are associated with fostering prosociality in students: human dignity, self-respect; attitudes and interpersonal relation skills; positively assessing the behaviour of others; creativity and initiative; communication, expressing one's feelings; interpersonal and social empathy; assertiveness; real and displayed prosocial models; prosocial behaviour; and social and complex prosociality. His findings were published in 1990 in *Psicologia y Education de la Prosocialidad,* organised according to the 10 factors. The book was translated into Slovak and published in 1992 as *Etická výchova [Ethical education].* A translation error led to prosocial education being rendered as ethics education. But the two words do not mean the same thing. Prosociality is not the same as morality (Grác, 2004): prosocial behaviour can be unethical, and unethical behaviour can be prosocial (Is the help being offered good under all circumstances: helping vs cheating?). This translation of Olivar's book became the education ministry's recommended textbook for ethical education at the primary and lower secondary levels. The term then began to feature in Slovak curricular documents.

> Prosocial behaviour is behaviour that benefits another person or group of people, that is not performed out of duty or in expectation of an award. It is behaviour that reinforces the integrity and cohesion of society and is based on helping, giving, sharing, working with and befriending members of that society. (Učebné osnovy etickej výchovy pre 5. až 9. ročník základnej školy, 1997, p. 2)

Problematic aspects of ethical education

Given that the translation of Olivar's book was poorly received, it comes as no surprise to discover that the subject was beset with problems from the start—some of which have yet to be resolved.

In terms of the ideological governing form the problem may be that ethical education is offered as an alternative to religious education. Kaliský (2019) notes that, unlike in Germany, in Slovakia ethical education is a compulsory subject rather than an optional one, which gives it some standing. However, its status would improve if it were made compulsory for all pupils, in some years at least—"the status of the subject reflects the relationship (influence) between the church and the state" (Kaliský, 2019, p. 121).

But, religious faith may be a private matter for some and since they have to make a mandatory choice, they have to admit their own world view/moral identity, and they may be uncomfortable with that. Having to make that decision can lead to arguments, judgements, divisions or even insults; in the more religious parts of Slovakia ethical education is seen as an atheist subject and consequently is not even offered in some schools. Moreover, if religious faith is a private matter one can quite legitimately ask whether religious education should be taught in schools as part of the core timetable (Kaliský, 2019). This privilege is the outcome of the aforementioned treaty of 2004 that confers a stable influence and status on this ideological power, along with certain advantages (the need for textbooks, teaching materials and guidance).

A far greater problem that has yet to be solved is the notion of prosociality and whether pupils are sufficiently prosocial. A number of scholars keep returning to this issue and the need to resolve it (e.g. Grác, 2004; Gluchman, 1999, 2009; Baďurová, 2019; Kaliský, 2019). It is often argued that prosociality is reduced to applied psychology: that it is merely a psychology-based subject "concerning the issue of separating social and moral practices (primarily human behaviour) into selfish ones and prosocial ones" (Gluchman, 2009, p. 63).

The philosophical foundations of prosociality are weak. It is not based on a specific philosophical or ethical system and is not grounded in the moral norms that underpin morality and moral teaching; social norms are not the same thing as moral norms (Grác, 2006).

But psychology does not only influence the goals of ethical education but also the methods used. Prosocial behaviours are developed through social psychological training; the active training of social skills, good practices, where the preferred method of instruction is naturally experiential learning. International experience shows us that as pupils age methods such as textual analysis, argumentation, thought experiments, case studies and writing philosophical essays can also be used. These methods undoubtedly help develop the critical thinking skills much feted in debates today. Slovak ethical education does not develop argument skills, and pupils are not taught the skills that would enable them to interpret and articulate worldviews and value positions. These skills are some of the oldest tasks of philosophy. Grác (2004) complains that the philosophical and ethical thinking on morality is shallow and consequently secondary school pupils do not fully develop ethical thinking and lack the theoretical background on moral phenomena that would enable them to distinguish moral behaviour from immoral behaviour.

Germany can be considered a good example of a philosophical mindset: although the education minister of each state has autonomy in decisions on school subjects, the philosophical tradition is present in each state. In most states the subject is called *Ethics*, but other labels are *Ethics/Philosophy, Shaping Life – Ethics – Religious Studies, Values and Norms or Philosophising with Children.* This last subject is, according to Kaliský (2019), the most philosophical of the ethical education subjects taught at the primary level.

There is, however, a serious downside to prosociality that has been touched on but not sufficiently debated. Criticism of the concept of prosociality is not merely restricted to the argument that it is excessively psychological but also relates to the ideas and philosophy underpinning it and the fact that it cannot be consider axiomatic.

An alternative subject?

In concluding this section on the desecularisation of the state and public education, we argue that the diversity of worldviews in society should be reflected in public state education. Needless to say, the situation in Slovakia is complicated. The analysis of the background to the concept of prosociality and the reconstruction of the period in which ethical education became a school subject show that one can legitimately refer to it as an alternative. After all ethical education is very similar to the religious view of the world.

On the one hand R. R. Olivar (1992) defines prosociality as universal or humanist behaviour that is intended to benefit another person, group of people or a social objective without expectation of a reward, yet on the other he openly admits that it was inspired by Christian charisma and spirituality (Olivar & Gil, 2019). Further support can be found for this premise. Gluchman (2009) pulls no punches in his description of the peculiar circumstances under which the subject was created and that lead him to question the whole process. The commission responsible for introducing ethical education was headed by L. Lencz, with whom readers will already be familiar. Sukuba (1999) states that although he himself was a member of the commission he was not given the opportunity to participate in the decisions on whether ethical education should be made a compulsory subject or about the concept of prosociality. Final decisions on education areas and school subjects are normally the result of collaboration among the academics, experienced teachers and various civic organisations invited to sit on the commissions and teams that discuss and defend the various ideas and visions before coming to an agreement. But this was not the case with ethical education: the concept was installed by a single person, based on that person's subjective values, and over time, that same person acquired such legitimacy that he eventually became an indisputable guru.

Lencz, the key person behind the conception of ethical education in Slovakia, is openly religious and an advocate of Christian philosophy. One of his advisors was B. Wakeman, a foreign expert who was directly involved in creating and implementing ethics at the behest of *Christian Action Research and Education,* a British charitable organisation. The aim was to implement Judaeo-Christian values in Eastern Europe, which was at that time a secular region (Wakeman, 1994).

Beňo (2004) notes that in 2004 almost all the ethical education teachers came from theological faculties, where they had studied a combination of ethical education and religious education. The theological faculties were therefore responsible for preparing teachers to teach a subject that was supposedly neutral on ideology and worldview. Is it any wonder that its neutrality can be questioned?

Olivar's theory is not well-known globally and is not commonly found in other education systems. Kaliský (2019) for instance states that it is unknown in German-speaking countries and that his work has never been published in German. Lencz himself says that the theory only took root in some parts of Spain, Portugal and Latin America (Lencz, 1994). While Beňo (2004) claims that Olivar's theory is popular in countries where the Catholic Church has a strong standing.

One can argue that in the case of *ethical education* soft religious belief came to shape a subject that was meant to be non-religious per se. Pupils and students are not

subconsciously taught or indoctrinated in a view based on religious values, nonetheless the content and form of ethical education offer little in the way of a contrasting view. Given the historical heritage of European culture it is not surprising that public education should offer religious education as a school subject, be that on a voluntary, alternative, or elective mandatory basis (Germany, Austria, Finland, Norway, Sweden, Belgium, Luxembourg)[1]. However, given the way the desecularisation of education policy and education processes is framed, it is relatively rare in Slovakia where the deliberately selected alternative atheist subject limits both the aims and methods and content diversity. So, in Slovakia the topics covered in ethical education are not just determined by the limited time available but also by the fact that the very idea of prosociality does not 'allow' it.

Ethical education varies from country to country. In Germany the education ministries in each of the 16 states have autonomy over the subject composition. In Bavaria pupils are taught *Ethik,* the syllabus of which is based on social science; pupils learn not just about the ordinary daily lives of people of different religions (World Religions in Everyday Life) but also study Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism and Buddhism) (LehrplanPLUS Grundschule, 2000). In Saxony-Anhalt the subject taught is philosophical ethics and its thematic units are based around Kant's four questions *What can I know?, What ought I to do? What can I hope for? What is man?* In *Lebensgestaltung-Ethik-Religionskunde* (Creation of life – Ethics – Religious Studies, Brandenburg) pupils in the later primary years cover topics relating to globalisation, interculturalism, the thematic unit peace – justice – utopia, esoterics and occultism (Rahmenlehrplan Lebensgestaltung-Ethik-Religionskunde Sekundarstufe I., 2004).

An ethics subject that is based on philosophising with children is taught in three German states (Schleswig-Holstein, Mecklenburg-Vorpommern and Nordrhein-Westfalen); this concept is linked to the work of M. Lipman (Philosophy-for-Children) and G. Matthews ideas (Philosophy and the Young Child), which are not rooted in scientific content but the original philosophical wonder at everyday situations. In the final year in the state of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern pupils learn about embryonic cloning (Rahmenplan Philosophieren mit Kindern, Jahrgangsstufen 7. – 10., 2002).

Given the strong philosophical tradition in Germany, one would expect ethical education to have a wider scope. Although the case of Malta shows that needn't be the case. In implementing its innovative curricular changes Slovakia would do well to observe the situation in Malta. Malta has a strong Catholic tradition and so up until 2012 ethics was not studied in schools, only religious education was offered. With the growing cultural and religious diversity in the country the situation changed: an Ethics Education Programme was introduced under the New National Curriculum Framework (Ministry of Education, Employment and the Family, 2012). Despite the strong, privileged position of the Catholic Church in society, the programme was not designed to avoid confrontation with Christianity

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[1] Even under the laic regime in France religious education forms part of the school curriculum in the regions of Alsace and Lorraine (UFAL, 2016); in fact, over the last few years questions have been asked as to whether there is a need for religious knowledge because students cannot understand history or art or even French without a basic knowledge of religion(s); teachers should have opportunities to include religious knowledge in different subjects.

as was the case with prosocial education. "The Ethics Programme adopts a philosophical approach and aims to address the diverse religious and secular moral beliefs, traditions and cultures of students" (Mizzi & Mercieca, 2020). It is based on Socrates' 'examined life' (Wain, 2016), and Aristotle's phronêsis (Wain, 2014), in the sense that it does not only sensitise students into knowledge and understanding of the moral domain but, presents ethics as a process of thinking and reflective practices that help students become skilful in ethical inquiry and action. The critical and creative thinking developed in the Ethics Programme also includes 'caring thinking' (Lipman, 2003). Hence, the Ethics curriculum borrows considerably from the practice of Philosophy for Children and its central interpretation of the classroom as a community of inquiry. Students, for example, are required to enter the mind-frame of the others, whose rights are violated (exploitation of labour, early marriage, oppressive governments, and hostility) (Mizzi & Mercieca, 2020).

Taking these examples and the experiences of countries such as Malta into account, and considering the potentially Christian background to ethical education, it is not fair to present it to parents as an alternative. However, the existing model of ethics education is seemingly beyond criticism and accepted unquestioningly and without opposition.

> Of the vast majority of articles and studies on ethical education in Slovakia, almost all without exception seem to agree with and count up the positive aspects of prosocial teaching. One has the impression that we have discovered something that the rest of the world has yet to learn, that everything is as it should be and that everyone is happy. Is that really the case or are we just lying to ourselves, or do we just find it easier to live under this illusion? (Gluchman, 2009, p. 61)

The names Olivar and Lencz are uttered with the pathos of unquestionable and absolute legitimacy even twenty years on.

Conclusion

Religious and national elements are relatively strong, and sometimes dominant, aspects of Slovak education and education policy. The present analysis highlights the specific constellations of the relationships between the church and the state in education governance and between religious and national (sometimes even nationalist) ideas in education in Slovakia. These often intertwine. The links between the church and state in education governance and education policy were re-established after the fall of the Iron Curtain. Later they came to a height with the desecularisation of education policy when religious elements penetrated state education as well. These links can also be seen in certain parts of the curriculum. These influences are particularly evident in the teaching of history, where there is a tendency to interpret Slovak statehood in terms of the Catholic Slovak war-time state that collaborated with the fascists. It was in that era that elements of Catholicism and strong nationalism began to combine and some political elites attempted to revive this through the introduction of policies after the fall of communism and Slovak independence. The specific nature of ethical education goes hand in hand with this as it is based on religious ideas and principles. The later introduction of ethics education as a compulsory alternative to religious education led to the paradoxical situation in which the two supposedly alternative subjects

are founded on similar ideological principles. The difference is that in religious education these are communicated overtly, as being both traditional and conservative, while in ethical education they tend to be more implicit. Church representatives have even explicitly justified this ideological uniformity on political grounds, thereby confirming the desecularisation and politicisation tendencies noted above:

> Within the meaning of the Slovak Constitution, ethics are based on Christian tradition and so ethics education has the same objective as religious education. Ethics as a school subject, therefore, does not contradict Christian ethics but instead creates an environment that facilitates communication, without which true faith, the aim of religious education, cannot develop. In this regard, ethics education is not actually an alternative to RE but instead complements it. (Reimer, 2016, p. 238)

This is an interpretation that is non-standard and not commonly found in other countries. Most subjects taught in other countries that can be considered equivalent to the *ethical education* taught in Slovakia are much richer in content. They tend to cover topics such as racism, unemployment, multiculturalism, globalisation, social progress, world ethos, the image of the world, the image of humans, European culture, war, peace, social utopias, social justice and global inequality, occultism, bioethics and environmental ethics, historicity, aesthetics, scientific and technological responsibility, truth and fiction and so on.

Our analysis also reveals the absence of a participative and deliberative approach to education policy in Slovakia. The rebuilding of the school system after the fall of the Iron Curtain and its undergirding in historical identification led all too frequently to the creation and implementation of education policies by authorities or curricular 'gurus'. That has weakened public controls and the prerequisite expert discussions, the consequences of which are still being felt today. Slovak education is therefore still subject to the influences of the 'ideological governing forms' that have become part of political power. The 'de-laicisation' in Slovakia is an example of how political power can overlap excessively with ideological power, preventing Slovak society from becoming more open.

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