

Country Report: Slovakia

Philosophy on (at least) Three Borders

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General information about Slovakia and its educational system

Slovakia is one of the smaller countries in the European Union. With an area of almost 50 thousand square kilometers, it has about five and a half million inhabitants. Located in Central Europe, its northern neighbor is Poland, its western neighbors are the Czech Republic and Austria, its southern neighbor is Hungary, and on the east, Slovakia has about 90 km of Schengen border with Ukraine. Historically, Slovakia was part of Great Moravia, later of the Kingdom of Hungary and the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. After the First World War, the Slovak nation was united with the Czech nation, and for about seventy-five years (until 1992), they formed the Czechoslovak federation. After the Second World War, Czechoslovakia found itself in the sphere of influence of the Soviet Union. At the end of the 1980s, the so-called Velvet revolution led to the peaceful (or gentle, hence velvet) removal of the communist regime. In 1993, the Czechoslovak Federation ceased to exist, and two independent states were established: the Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic. They joined relatively quickly in Euro-Atlantic structures, including the EU and NATO in 2004, and the OECD in 2000.

The Slovak education system in the proper sense of the word began only with the founding of the independent Slovak Republic on January 1, 1993. Previously, the education system was part of larger units.¹ Medieval and early modern education was provided through monastic or church schools or private education of the upper classes. Holy Roman Empress and German Queen Maria Theresa (from the Habsburg dynasty) introduced compulsory school attendance for all children in 1774. Historically, public authorities and the church founded schools in Slovakia. Jesuits played an important role by establishing two universities and many secondary and primary schools.

In the twentieth century, the three-level education system of primary school (6-15 years), secondary school (15-19 years), and the university was stabilized and developed.² Currently, about 15 percent of the population completes their education by attending primary school. About 63 percent of the Slovak population has completed some type of secondary school, and an average of 22 percent of the population has a university degree. In the younger generation of 25- to 34-year-olds, the proportion of university graduates is 31 percent.³ The vast majority of schools at all levels are established and funded by the state or local public authorities

¹ A detailed description provides Kudláčová (2016). Historical development of education in the territory of today's Slovakia is also briefly described by the European Commission: https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/content/historical-development-72_en, 30.03.2021.

² A more detailed overview of types and variations of schools in Slovakia is provided by e.g. portal Scholaro (a U.S. based company that provides evaluation services and easy-to-use software for international admissions and recruiting) <https://www.scholaro.com/pro/Countries/Slovak-Republic/Education-System>, 30.03.2021.

³ These data can be found in Slovak or English at the website of the Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic; see <https://slovak.statistics.sk>, 30.03.2021.

(towns, villages), but there is also a small percentage of churches (Hanesova 2008) and private schools. There are also a small number of schools based on ethnic or linguistic principles, such as Hungarian-language schools in southern Slovakia and Ruthenian-language schools in the east.

Current situation of philosophy in schools

Philosophy is taught as a special subject only at the highest level of secondary schools and selective grammar schools (*gymnasia*) that provide general education with preparation for university education. Philosophy is taught in these schools for one or two years. In specific courses on philosophy, students learn basic knowledge about the history of philosophy and philosophical theories, are introduced to basic philosophical problems, work with the analysis of texts, and develop competencies in critical thinking. In the last decade, critical thinking has been an intensively discussed topic in Slovakia, not only in the political but also in the educational context. Many civic education initiatives aim to develop tools for critical thinking in schools (Larson 2013).

In all other types and levels of secondary schools and primary schools, the subject of philosophy is not taught in terms of a focus on philosophical knowledge. However, civic education is a required subject in primary and secondary schools (Tonková 2015). This civic education includes the development of social and civic reflections on the social environments, family, school, community, regions, and state and international organizations. Students acquire basic information in the fields of political science, the theory of state and law, economic life, civic engagement, critical thinking, psychology, sociology, social sciences, and humanities. These courses are important because civics teachers in Slovakia are traditionally educated at the departments of philosophy, where they study a teaching program focused on philosophy and civics. Currently, there is an intensive discussion in Slovakia about necessary reforms in the school system, which is associated with the decentralization of competencies (Mihálik & Klimovský 2014) in the field of lesson distribution and attention to individual subjects. Therefore, some schools focus more attention on civics than others, and students can gain more knowledge and competencies in this area. The issue of critical thinking and conscious civic engagement is increasingly coming to the fore. There are many training programs for teachers, innovative programs that focus on the development of civic education concerning the current challenges facing society at the local and global level. Philosophical questions also arise in courses on religious education or ethics, of which students must choose one.

Some schools use international educational curricula, such as the International Baccalaureate School in Bratislava. This school also emphasizes the areas of philosophical and critical knowledge more intensively. The students receive training in academic writing and argumentation. This training is also reflected in high school competitions. For several years, IB students from Bratislava achieved very good results in the International Philosophical Olympiad.

In general, there is only very limited education in philosophy in the strict sense of the word in Slovakia. However, philosophy courses in the school environment have traditionally been

associated with the social sciences and humanities, and students receive some basic introduction to philosophy in courses on civic education. Teachers are prepared for this subject especially in the departments of philosophy, which is both a challenge and an opportunity for philosophers.

Current situation of teacher training in philosophy

Departments of philosophy prepare primary and secondary school teachers to deliver civic education at approximately ten universities in Slovakia. The required qualification for a teacher at a primary or secondary school in the subject of civic education is the second level of university study, i.e., the master's degree. Students at the university acquire a relatively detailed overview of the history of philosophy from ancient to contemporary philosophy. They go through all the major systematic disciplines of philosophy, including metaphysics, epistemology, anthropology, ethics, political philosophy, and others. In preparation for their teaching profession, students study the didactics of philosophy and have a compulsory practice of several types. First, they attend classes at primary and secondary schools where they observe education and consult with the teacher. Later, they prepare selected topics and teach students under the guidance of a tutor. They consult with their tutors, who advise them on how their teaching can be changed or improved.

The tradition of philosophical schools in Slovakia in the period after the Second World War was contaminated by the ideology of Marxism-Leninism and the displacement of other approaches and the lack of resources for the study of current philosophical trends. This crisis or post-communist trauma from the totalitarian regime controlling the field of humanities and social sciences at Slovak universities is well described by Lehman (Lehman 1997). After 1989, some senior professors remained in the departments of philosophy (Kvasz 2000, Kvasz 2001). At the same time, some dynamic developments began, influenced by new sources to which philosophers had previously had no access. A significant number of translations of original philosophical literature have been published in Slovakia. A linguistic advantage is also the availability of Czech translations, which Slovak students can completely understand. Several departments have developed the phenomenological tradition of thinking and the study of existentialism. A few institutes have contributed to bioethical discussions. Some departments are more historically oriented philosophically, but many philosophers of the younger or middle generation actively participate in the development of the analytical philosophy approach in Slovakia.

The didactics of philosophy are not one of the primary interests of philosophers, but some of them deal with it nevertheless and support initiatives in the development of the subject of civic education. The regular organization of the International Philosophical Olympiad in Slovakia, other high school competitions such as the Human Rights Olympiad, debate associations, and debates in clubs in secondary schools all contribute to the cultivation of interest in philosophical studies in secondary schools.

Philosophical education in Slovakia stands at the intersection of several borders. The first is the post-communist legacy and coping with the rupture caused by the totalitarian approach of Marxist-Leninist philosophy after World War II. The second border includes discussions

between the continental tradition and the analytical style of philosophy. These differences sometimes cause tension and disharmony in the community of philosophers in Slovakia. The third boundary is the tendency to focus attention in education on STEM disciplines, deemphasizing humanities subjects in primary and secondary schools while also reducing the role of philosophy at universities. Despite the above challenges, education in philosophy is still quite possible, and it receives support from the state education policy in Slovakia. Much depends on how the community of philosophers deals with society's requirements for more practical applications of philosophy in teaching in primary and secondary schools and how they contribute to discussions of science and social issues.

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