

Ing. Dominik Gřešák is a
PhD candidate at the Men-
del University in Brno,
Czech Republic. Contact:
xgresak@mendelu.cz

Modernization of Education as a Cure for Euroscepticism in the Visegrad Group Countries

Dominik Gřešák

Editors of the series:
Sławomir Czech, Lubor
Lacina.
Contact: slawo-
mir.czech@ue.katowice.pl;
lubor.lacina@mendelu.cz

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[1]

Executive summary

The V4 countries often react negatively to EU's actions, yet they avoid putting compromise solutions on the table. In a number of areas, the efforts to cooperate with other EU members seems to disappear. These tendencies might be counterbalanced by initiating pro-European actions concerning education, information and identity issues.

Recommendations for policy makers:

- Addressing populism, nationalism and misinformation through active EU-funded campaigns that refute misinformation with facts.
- Synchronization of policies regarding adherence to political goals and respect for EU's liberal values.
- Modernizing educational systems which currently do not touch upon the subject of media literacy nor include teaching about modern history, fundamental rights within the framework of EU membership and EU values in a satisfactory manner.
- Taking steps to create the sense of EU identity (identification with European values and cooperation).
- Emphasizing the political and economic benefits of EU membership.

Some manifestations of Euroscepticism in V4

Euroscepticism can be understood as critical attitude against one or many areas of EU policies but also as a criticism of European integration as a process (Kaniok 2011). Eurosceptic manifestations are mainly related to the promotion of the democratic legitimacy of the EU (Ultan, Ornek 2015). Populist parties use the EU as a priority cause of failure to promote a country's national interest (Danics, Tejchmanová 2017). However, Ultan and Ornek (2015) mention that if the EU focuses on the essence (roots) of Euroscepticism rather than perceiving it as a process, then the argumentative powers of Eurosceptics will weaken.

The EU criticizes Hungary and Poland for threatening the independence of the media and the judiciary and for the state of their political systems. In autumn 2020, Hungary and Poland blocked the adoption of the EU budget for the period 2021-2027 (ČTK 2020). Polish no-LGBT zones were condemned by European Commission. The new law, which prohibits informing schools about minority sexual orientation, has been heavily criticized in Hungary (ČTK24, 2021). Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán questions deeper EU integration and criticizes the EU for migration policy (Zgut, Csehi 2019). The leader of the Polish ruling party Jarosław Kaczyński uses Eurosceptic rhetoric to address topics such as dissatisfaction with Western European states, migration, support for traditional family values and condemnation of political correctness linked to Muslim minorities and LGBTQ. Additionally, he hammers European Commission for the alleged assaults on Polish sovereignty (Zgut, Csehi 2019). Czech political party ANO, led by Prime Minister Andrej Babiš, supports EU reform and promotes the reduction of bureaucracy in Brussels. During the migration crisis in Europe, Babiš criticized the reception of refugees in the Czech Republic (Koźbiał 2020). In addition, according to the European Commission's inspection report, Andrej Babiš has a conflict of interest because he has a direct economic interest in the success of the Agrofert holding. According to the auditors, subsidies from the EU structural funds, which companies received from the holding company since 9 February 2017, are unjustified (ČTK, Aktuálně.cz 2021). There is currently no political leader in Slovakia with such a Eurosceptic narrative as in the above-mentioned states. On the contrary, Šabata (2021) states that President Čaputová supports the abolition of the right of veto, so that the agreement of all EU Member States cannot be blocked by one state only. However, Ušiak and Jankovská (2019) argue that Euroscepticism circulates across Slovak society and that one of the reasons is the radicalization of people and political elites, which results in sensitivity to controversial issues in society - the emergence of manipulation. In Slovakia, too, the topic of migration is exploited by populists and Eurosceptics (e.g., ĽSNS).



Identification of possible threats stemming from Euroscepticism

At present, only in the Czech Republic distrust of the EU prevails over trust (European Commission 2021a). In 2010, confidence in the EU was higher in Slovakia and Poland than in Lithuania (one of the most pro-European countries). However, in 2015 declines in the confidence in the EU among all V4 countries could be noticed compared to 2010 (Poland: 48 vs. 58%; Slovakia: 48 vs. 71%; Czech Republic: 43 vs. 50%) (European Commission 2011; 2015). Around this time the EU addressed the migration crisis and dealt with the effects of the debt crisis – two factors that may have provoked Eurosceptics.

The current Eurosceptic narrative in the V4 states can damage political relations within the collective of all EU Member States. Indeed, it may be that unjustified Euroscepticism in the V4 countries, which would theoretically gain momentum, may have encouraged political actors in other Member States to engage in such a Eurosceptic narrative. This could result in the fragmentation of the entire collective of EU Member States – a negative impact on political and economic negotiations, a paralysis of international cooperation, an inability to resolve by consensus.

Unlike Slovakia, Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic do not belong to the euro area. In the latter two countries, the public's position against joining the Eurozone prevails (in Poland 56% of respondents is against joining the Eurozone, in the Czech Republic 60% and in Hungary 31%) (European Commission 2021b). Euroscepticism can move the debate on the adoption of the euro to the level of emotions and overshadow the constructive debate on the positive and negative consequences associated with common currency (e.g., transaction costs, euro area membership requirements etc).

Populists can use a possible increase in social distrust of the EU to push for exiting the EU. The referendum on leaving the EU in the UK is one example of such story. A possible exit from the EU may have a negative impact on the V4 states, including trade policy and economic prosperity, which would be a consequence of leaving EU's Single Market. In terms of economic aspects, there would also be a risk of a decline in foreign direct investment in the V4 countries. The financial capital of Western investors could thus be transferred to other Member States (e.g., Romania or Slovenia).



With the accelerated ascent of Euroscepticism, political parties representing nationalist or xenophobic views may eventually come to power. An example is Czech political party SPD, which is characterized by xenophobic and strongly nationalist elements according to the report on extremism (see the Ministry of the Interior of the Czech Republic 2021). SPD

promotes also withdrawal from the EU (SPD 2021). Parties with xenophobic, nationalist, or even populist elements can undermine democratic values, which can have an adverse effect on the state's political developments leaning possibly to autocratic rule style.

How to curb the damage inflicted by Eurosceptic motives

Politicians are aware of the power of the media and do not resist using it. The media was misused before the referendum on UK's withdrawal from the EU. Campaign Vote Leave laundered £750,000 shortly before the referendum, which they spent on these online disinformation campaigns (TED 2019). Even in V4 we can find examples of how the media have been misused for political ambitions. The dailies of the media group MAFRA, owned by Babiš, were criticized for their political bias (Jirák, Köpplová, 2020). The election campaigns in 2013 and 2017 were dominated by advertisements from ANO. Unlike other political parties, ANO funding is not dependent on state funding or membership fees. ANO has only one benefactor – Babiš (Buščíková, Guasti 2019). In Poland, political party PiS installed a new leadership on public television and radio, which laid off three hundred employees and other journalists left voluntarily. Important functions are held by people who are loyal to PiS (Aktuálně.cz 2020). There is a pro-government media association in Hungary – it facilitates censorship and control of media content. Both the Media Council and the Hungarian Competition Authority (bodies controlled by Fidesz) have made it impossible for political reasons to merge independent media groups (Griffen 2020). In Slovakia, the centre-left government of the then Prime Minister Fico redirected its advertisements to friendly media (radio Viva, news channel TA3, daily Pravda). The government has also reduced purchases of centre-right media advertising – the political bias of government advertising spending (Transparency International 2013). Based on these examples, we believe the protection of political media should be increased, as they are essential for a well-functioning democracy.

Populists are currently struggling to damage West's reputation as a place of opportunities (conditions for a better standard of living), and are questioning the belief that Western liberalism is an attractive destination for emigrants from Central and Eastern European countries. The goal of populists from this region is to prove that the East is better than the West (Krastev, Holmes 2018). In any case, a look at the state of democracy and living standards in Eastern European non-EU countries, such as Ukraine and Belarus (Perlínová 2020; UNICEF 2020), suggests that leaving the EU would not be politically and economically beneficial for the citizens of V4 countries.



The decline in the perceived gains stemming from EU membership in Hungary is also due to citizens not noticing a rapid improvement in liv-

ing standards. Hungarians did not recognize the tangible personal benefits of membership, even though Hungary emphasized the political benefits of membership before joining the EU in the 1990s: political participation in the EU institutions, guarantees of strong democracy, freedom of movement and the abolition of borders between Member States (Heller, Kohut, Kriza 2013). Similar feelings were recorded in the Czech Republic: with the advent of democracy people expected prosperity and since their expectations were not met, they are willing to look for a political alternative (Císař 2019). Citizens need more emphasis on the factual information and benefits of membership that they should appreciate. A solution is offered in the form of greater transparency in the use of EU financial funds. For example, for the period 2014-2020, according to the European Commission [2020a], the V4 countries contributed € 57,952.8 million to the EU budget and received € 195,685 from it. For comparison, only Germany and France together contributed 349,490.6 million to the EU budget and received € 179,002.

It is also important to mention the role of identity. Khaled (2019) noticed that national identity will always be strong and will not allow for a greater importance of European identity. However, it is possible that the two identities may coexist. The reasons for the weak European identity are mainly due to the following factors: bias towards economic stimuli, individual preferences and a strong base of leading political parties.

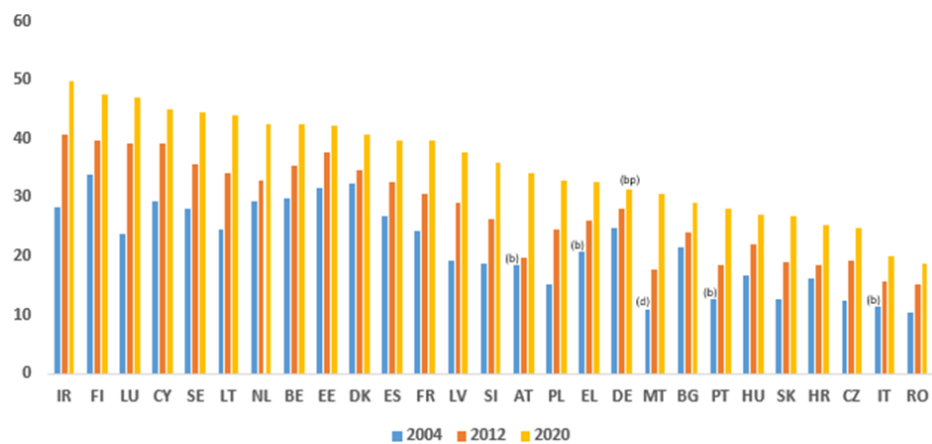
European nations have their own cultures, languages, customs and traditions. Many of them fought against each other in the past, and it was not until the 1950s that a longer period without war began. All this could possibly undermine the collective European identity. Even so, it is possible to break down the so-called barrier, for example by modernizing the educational system or, for example, by cross-border mobility of workers and students. The EU was created to unite the peoples of Europe and strengthen peace, and it is therefore worth pulling together.

Based on the factors outlined above, which are associated with Euroscepticism, it is recommended to focus on strengthening the educational system. Luc Van den Brande, Adviser to Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker, has already proposed raising awareness of European integration among young people in order to increase trust between the EU and nation states. He recommended introducing general education about the EU and its history (Fox 2018). The European Parliament has further specified this proposal in the European Parliament's motion for a resolution on learning EU at school (2015/2138(INI)). The European Parliament mentioned that, in order to reduce Euroscepticism in society and also to ensure that society does not feel a democratic deficit in membership, citizens should be better informed about the EU and should be encouraged to take an interest in the project of European unification as well as actively participate in it (European Parliament 2015). Alas, in the



Czech Republic as much as 50% of respondents do not understand how the EU functions, in Hungary 38%, in Slovakia 32% and in Poland 19%. The EU average is 37% (so Hungary and the Czech Republic are above average in this respect) (European Commission 2020b). Thanks to the modernization of the educational system, it is possible for citizens to become more aware of the EU and to be able to objectively assess the advantages and disadvantages of membership. It is essential to provide citizens with information on their rights in the EU or the differences between Member States and non-Member States. As part of a long-term strategy, it is necessary to educate the pre-productive generation in particular, but it is also important to focus on the productive and post-productive part of the population. The latter two generations decide in what shape and condition they will pass on their country to the future generation.

Figure 1: The share of EU citizens aged 25 to 64 with tertiary level of education



Flags used: b = Break in times series, d = Definitions differs, more metadata on Eurostat (2021), p = provisional.

Source: Own processing using data from Eurostat (2021).

Modernization of education is not just about raising citizens' political awareness of the EU, but it also leads to increased qualification of individuals, which has a positive impact on increasing their value in the labor market and improving their living standards. Moreover, several scholars (Foster and Frieden 2021; 2017; Becker, Fetzer and Nova 2017) have demonstrated that well educated and highly qualified people have benefited from European integration the most and share a positive attitude towards the EU. Baute et al. (2018) argue that people with tertiary education have a lower level of fear of European integration than people with lower education. Sarrasin, Kuhn and Lancee (2018) mention that even though Switzerland is not a member of the EU, Swiss with tertiary education and higher incomes support the EU rather than being Euro-



¹ Includes: short cycle tertiary education, bachelor's or equivalent degree, master's or equivalent degree, doctoral or equivalent degree (Eurostat 2021).

sceptic. Figure 1 shows data on tertiary education¹ for individuals in EU countries. The V4 countries (especially Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic) lag far behind. The percentage increase of individuals with tertiary education increased in Poland by 8.4% over the last 8 years (11th fastest increase from the 27th state), in Slovakia by 7.8% (13th fastest), in Hungary by 5.1% (23rd fastest) and in the Czech Republic by 5.6% (21st fastest). These numbers leave much to be desired, but political initiatives are able to bring positive change in this area.

Policy recommendations for the modernization of education

Basing on the above observations, the following recommendations concerning the field of education are given. These recommendations are intended to eliminate unconstructive Euroscepticism and are aimed for both the pre-productive, productive and post-productive generations. It is specified which bodies should be responsible for implementing the individual recommendations.

Recommendations for the executives of university faculties, educational centres, the Ministry of Education and for regional and municipal authorities:

⇒ Enhanced support for the activities of NGOs and think tanks focusing on international relations. Special attention should be paid to NGOs participating in informing citizens about EU activities and their rights within the EU membership, dealing with the integration of migrants from foreign countries in the country, helping domestic citizens in finding employment in the EU or organizing events aimed at learning about other nationalities and cultures. Ministries of education, university faculties, educational centres, but also municipal and regional authorities (departments dealing with education and culture) should help NGOs in promoting their activities or provide facilities for events. Better promotion increases the chances for NGOs to contact potential sponsors that would help the very operations of these organizations. Similar support should be offered to think tanks involved in informing society about international relations.

Recommendations for the executives of NGOs and think tanks (cooperating in the field of international relations), primary and secondary schools of university faculties:

⇒ The solutions offered by think tanks to the government should not be theoretical, but practically tangible. Yet their success depends on the willingness of governments to listen to them, especially when these include populists and Eurosceptics. It is therefore important that think tanks build their reputation and status among the citizens



themselves, for example through broad public relations, open presentation of their results through the media or by holding educational events for the general public. Think tanks should strive to offer the general public free access to their work (like establishing online libraries or publishing magazines easily accessible to the general public). It is also important that they cooperate with the scientific community and school teachers. Thus they can take advantage of the findings of academics when writing specific recommendations that are addressed to the government.

- ⇒ Think tanks and NGOs accompanied with academics, local governments or private businesses, should organize educational happenings for the general public, focusing on the following topics: EU media literacy, citizens' rights in EU membership, EU activities and policies. Even students at the universities should be motivated to create their own think tanks in order to contribute to the awareness of society.
- ⇒ Primary and secondary school directors should work with academics, think tanks and NGOs to train teachers associated with their schools. These trainings, summer training camps for example, should concentrate on informing primary and secondary school teachers of a modernized form of teaching such subjects as history, law and civics. Teachers should understand that the teaching style should not be based primarily on mere spoken interpretation of data, but on simulations (e.g. specific historical events or legal actions of government institutions), games (the possibility of involving applications such as Kahoot or escape games). Teachers should use authentic video footage to teach pupils and make classes more engaging (e.g. to explain and compare the values of totalitarian and democratic regimes it is useful to introduce pupils to video interviews with citizens who have experienced both regimes and with political prisoners imprisoned in uranium mines). As part of teaching, students should also create study projects and work with sources other than their textbooks (e.g., professional articles, historical and biographical books and films, museums). Teachers of history, law and civics should be able to draw their students into the story itself (e.g. pupils should try out the adoption process of legislation in the EU institutions or be able to imagine the standard of living of citizens and the political and legal conditions of the time in the territory, using authentic images and their correct interpretation by the teacher).



Recommendations for ministries of education, management of primary and secondary schools, and national pedagogical institutes:

- ⇒ Introduction to the subject of media literacy and critical thinking. This subject could have a positive effect on the development of constructive critical thinking. In primary schools, pupils should have an

overview of where they can find objective information and how to identify misinformation. Pupils should be given the ability to search for important information on the subjects they are learning at the school (working with Internet resources). Pupils should also be instructed on dangerous and disinformation websites as well as introduced to cyber security. Students in high schools should be acquainted in depth with the different types of media and with how they can verify the information. The content of this subject in secondary schools should also include work with social networks (safety instructions).

⇒ Modernization of history teaching ought to imply concentrating on modern history. The structure of history teaching should change in such a way that students will not only master the legacy of national struggles in Europe, but also the joint efforts of nations to establish human rights and democracy (Stiglitz 2017). Regarding EU-related teaching, there is a need to set up clearly specific uniform curricula, as the European Parliament (2015) noted that this content of teaching is inconsistent across Member States. Moreover, history teaching should not only focus on periods such as prehistory, Antiquity, the Middle Ages, the modern age and early modern times finishing with end of World War II, but should also include the curriculum associated with the second half of the twentieth century and the beginning of the 21st century. The content of the course should be supplemented by the period after World War II, the developmental stages of the EU (from the 1950s to the present). Modernization should concern both primary and secondary schools (in secondary schools the subject matter should be discussed in more detail).

⇒ Modernization of civic education. The subject should present the fundamental values enshrined in Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union (respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of minorities). Teachers should also present, for comparison, the values that characterize totalitarianism (e.g., press censorship, autocratic government, state slavery). The modernization of civic education should concern primary schools.

⇒ Modernization of the subject of law in secondary schools (this point follows on from the previous point). The subject of law should be enriched by an interpretation concerning fundamental rights in the EU (functioning of EU institutions). Students should be introduced to the rights of a citizen of a Member State, the competences of the Member States and the individual EU institutions (European Commission, European Parliament, European Council, EU Council and European Court of Justice) and how a citizen of a Member State can participate in EU policies. Students should pay more attention to this



topic in their studies at universities (e.g. in fields such as international relations or international law).

⇒ Specifically targeted subjects in secondary schools should be developed in English (e.g. human migrations). This activity will achieve an increased quality of teaching in English (so the curriculum will not only include a separate subject of English) and at the same time students will be more motivated to integrate within the European community - that should increase their interest in foreign languages and international issues.

Recommendations for the executives of primary and secondary schools being interested in using the financing of development activities from the Erasmus+ program:

⇒ The importance of Erasmus+ and support for teaching in English. In secondary and primary schools, pupils and teachers should be involved in cross-border mobility in Erasmus+ framework. After returning from abroad, students should share their knowledge from abroad (school events attended by students, representing the cultures and customs of foreign countries to the audience, which would create positive impact on the erudition of students and the public). Cross-border mobility also improves the competences of teachers, for example in foreign language teaching, as well as in the exchange of know-how and teaching experience thus increasing their capabilities and skills.

Recommendations for the executives of secondary schools and university faculties:

⇒ Secondary schools should work in close cooperation with universities. High school directors should be open about the offers of university professors as well as students to organize lectures related to basic topics such as: modern history, EU law, media literacy or current global issues. This activity should be presented to university students as a recognized internship in their university studies (not only will they contribute to awareness at lower education, but they will also consolidate their information gathered during their studies, presentation skills and self-confidence).



Recommendations for regional and municipal authorities:

⇒ Interactive museums. Through multimedia elements, the museum visitor can be better captured than an organized tour led by a trained guide. The trend of the 21st century is audio-visual solutions in connection with haptics. With this technological solution, it is possible to

present information about modern history so that it arouses the visitor's emotions and perfectly draws him into the story. In any case, it is necessary to regularly update the content (information) that would be presented to visitors - here we offer cooperation with think-thanks, NGOs, and universities. To implement this recommendation, it is possible to apply for co-financing from the European Regional Development Fund.

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