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## History, Identity, and Curricula: Public Debates and Controversies Over the Proposal for a New History Curriculum in Croatia

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On 1 July 2016, tens of thousands of people gathered in the main square in Zagreb, Croatia's capital, to protest against the stalling of curricular reform. The demonstration was initiated by a civic initiative called *Croatia Can Do Better—Support the Comprehensive Curricular Reform*. It followed twenty-five years of unsuccessful attempts to carry out comprehensive education reform in Croatia. This failure was mostly due to political and ideological divisions in Croatian society and the inability of key political actors to reach a common ground on education. One particularity that is relevant for understanding the developments in education is the predominance of politics over other areas of the societal life, including issues that require professional judgments (Koren and Baranović 2009, 91–95). Education is never among political parties' key priorities, but it continues to be (mis-)used as a means of fighting political battles. Decision-making in the field thus tends to be subjected to short-term political interests and prone to change with every shift in the political arena. In the last quarter of a century, consensus among

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main political actors has been absent even on certain basic issues, such as the duration of compulsory education. This has left Croatia as one of very few European countries with only eight years of compulsory education (ages six to fourteen or fifteen).

Croatia declared independence in 1991, during the violent breakup of Yugoslavia. Right from the start, people made demands to change the education system inherited from the socialist period, but without a clear development strategy. As a result, changes in education during the 1990s were incoherent and often arbitrary. The first interventions in 1991–1992 focused on the textbooks and curricula narratives,<sup>1</sup> but there was no reform of the organizational structure of compulsory education system. Bigger changes occurred in non-compulsory secondary education at that point. The unified and vocationally directed system of secondary schools inherited from socialism was diversified: the elite four-year grammar schools—gymnasiums—were reinstated (they had been abolished in a mid-1970s reform), as well as the various types of four and three-year vocational schools (Koren and Baranović 2009, 95–96). According to some education experts, the system at the beginning of the 1990s thus switched back to the organizational structure set by a 1958 education reform, whereby compulsory education was extended to eight grades and secondary education remained split between gymnasiums and vocational schools (Pastuović 1996; Žiljak 2013).

Attempts to reform education in the 1990s were additionally marked by the Croatian leadership's efforts to create an independent and ethnically homogeneous state. During that decade the ruling party was the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ), which has in fact been in power for most of the period since 1990 (1990–2000, 2003–2011, 2016–today). A conservative right-wing party, its political attitudes vary from center-right to radical right and are strongly influenced by the ideology of ethnic nationalism. In early 1990s, the political leadership used education

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<sup>1</sup>For example, history textbooks inherited from the socialist period were modified in 1991 (mostly to remove Marxist terminology). In 1992 they were replaced with new ones, now strongly colored by the ideology of the Croatian statehood and nationalist perspective. New history curricula for primary and secondary schools were introduced in 1995, but they were pieced together from the titles and subtitles of textbooks published in 1992. For details, see: Koren and Baranović (2009, 96–105).

as one of the tools to redefine identity, mainly through curricula and textbooks of the so-called national subjects such as Croatian language, history, geography, and music. History teaching in particular was heavily politicized and subjected to alterations motivated by the interests of the ruling political elites in promoting ethno-national identity and conveying official interpretations of the past (Koren and Baranović 2009, 96–99). Catholic religious studies was introduced in Croatian schools at the very beginning of the decade—alongside Orthodox and Islamic religious studies, but these had significantly smaller shares of students.<sup>2</sup> Formally, Catholic religious studies is an elective subject; in reality, it has a special status because it is regulated by international agreements with the Vatican and opted for by a huge majority of students. Because Catholicism is considered a key feature of Croatian ethnic and national identity, Catholic religious studies is also sometimes considered one of the *national subjects*. Although the constitution defines Croatia as a secular state, the Catholic Church has exerted a very strong influence on its social and political life, including education since the beginning of the 1990s.

After unsuccessful attempts at reform in the 1990s, the Social Democrat (SDP)<sup>3</sup> government proposed a set of educational changes in 2002–2003 based on new strategic documents. The intention was to adapt Croatian education to European standards because European Union (EU) membership was proclaimed one of the most important national goals. That proposal included an extension of compulsory education from eight to nine years (with six-year primary education and three-year lower secondary), substantial curricular changes, a shift towards more student-centered teaching methods, and the introduction of the idea that learning outcomes should serve as a basis for defining teaching and learning requirements (Ministarstvo prosvjete i športa 2002). These ideas, however, met strong opposition from the conservative political parties

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<sup>2</sup>According to the last census in 2011, there were 4.28 million inhabitants, 90.42 percent Croats. According to religious affiliation, 86.28 percent were Catholic, 4.44 percent Orthodox Christian, and 1.47 percent Muslim. See: Croatian Bureau of Statistics (2011).

<sup>3</sup>The Social Democratic Party (SDP) has been one of the two most influential political parties in Croatia since 1990. It evolved from the former League of Communists of Croatia and it is the largest party of the Croatian center-left. It led the coalition governments from 2000–2003 and 2011–2016.

in the Parliament, as well as some groups from the academic community and the Croatian Academy of Science and Arts (HAZU), and they were eventually abandoned.<sup>4</sup> The new government, led by the HDZ (2003–2011),<sup>5</sup> rejected the 2002 reform proposal; another view prevailed, according to which the existing eight-year system of compulsory education need not be changed but “improved” (Koren and Baranović 2009, 106–107, 113–114). The government could not give up changes to education altogether because Croatia had gained the status of a candidate country for EU membership and needed to make institutional adjustments to EU standards and requirements to fulfill the accession criteria. New curricula were thus introduced in compulsory (primary) education in 2006 that included a modest shift towards defining of learning outcomes and some modifications in curricular content (Ministarstvo znanosti, obrazovanja i športa 2006). There were no changes, however, to curricula for secondary schools (gymnasiums and vocational schools) which originated from the mid 1990s and were heavily teacher and content-centered. The only major change to secondary education in that period was the introduction of the state graduation exam (*matura*) in 2009. A National Framework Curriculum, put forward by the Ministry of Science, Education and Sport in 2010, envisaged ten-year compulsory education (eight years of primary and two years of secondary), but it was never implemented (Ministarstvo znanosti, obrazovanja i športa 2010). Education policy and practice has remained fragmented and incoherent; key education documents such as primary and secondary school curricula differ significantly in methodology, and some subject curricula differ even in their definition of the goals and purpose of education.

Debate over the content of history curricula and textbooks has been another feature of these developments. Due to sharply divergent views of key events in twentieth-century Croatian history (such as World War II, communist rule in Yugoslavia, and the wars of the 1990s), history curricula and textbooks are constantly scrutinized and discussed in the

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<sup>4</sup>See, for example: Kustura (2002).

<sup>5</sup>In that period there were actually three conservative governments in a row led by the Croatian Democratic Union: the first from December 2003 to January 2008, the second from January 2008 to July 2009, and the third from July 2009 to December 2011. Retrieved from <https://vlada.gov.hr/prethodne-vlade-11348/11348>.

media, politics, and historiography. Curricula and textbooks published during the last twenty-five years reflect the clashing interpretations and divided memory that exists in Croatian society. This has made teaching these events a difficult task for history teachers (Koren 2015). The paradigm of history teaching, however, has been gradually changing in the last 20 years. Due to the influence of international trends and the activities of some history teachers and historians, the purpose of school history lessons has increasingly been perceived as a critical engagement with the past. This orientation has met resistance among those who perceive school history as a body of carefully selected facts and “proper” interpretations whose main purpose is the formation of a particular identity. Ethno-national ideology still strongly permeates the curricula and textbook narratives, as well as political and public expectations of history education’s aims and content.

Another shift in educational politics occurred under the second coalition government led by the SDP (2011–2015). After taking office in December 2011, the left-liberal governing coalition evidently had no coherent plan of its own for the education. Only in the third year of its mandate, after a proposal from some individuals and groups from academic circles, did the government develop a Strategy for Education, Science and Technology (hereafter called the Strategy), adopted by the Parliament in October 2014.<sup>6</sup> Prior to the Strategy, however, the Ministry of Education unsuccessfully attempted to introduce programs of civic and health education in schools. This led to ideological confrontations over the content of these programs as part of a broader culture war between conservative and liberal forces in society, battling over issues like same-sex marriage, reproductive rights, gender equality, and the introduction of sex education. A noticeable growth in conservative civil society organizations occurred in that period, mostly among conservative Catholic groups and organizations for veterans of the 1990s war. These groups advocate conservative, anti-liberal, and sometimes even anti-democratic values and ideas, and they seek to exercise influence over important political decisions, including those on education.

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<sup>6</sup>For the text of the Strategy, see: *Narodne novine* 124/2014. Also available online: [https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2014\\_10\\_124\\_2364.html](https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2014_10_124_2364.html).

As part of the Strategy, primary and secondary education reform was launched in 2015. Officially called the Comprehensive Curricular Reform (CKR), it was envisaged as a first major step towards changes in education and science. It aimed to transform and modernize the outdated education system by extending compulsory education from eight to nine grades, replacing existing curricula with new outcome-based ones, allowing students to choose among different modules in the final grades of gymnasium, and introducing new courses such as computer science, civic education, and sex and health education. It aimed at changing the philosophy and methodology of learning and teaching by promoting a student-centered approach and teacher autonomy, as well as more balance between gaining factual knowledge and developing skills (as opposed to rote learning and memorizing huge quantities of facts, which still dominate in Croatian schools). An Expert Work Group was formed to manage the reform process, in contrast to prior attempts which were managed directly by the Ministry of Education, as well as groups made up of 450 teachers and education experts that were given tasks to develop new curricula.<sup>7</sup> The output was a total of fifty-seven curricular documents, including a new National Framework Curriculum as the central document and others necessary to conduct comprehensive reform—such as various subject curricula, three methodological manuals, frameworks for evaluation, frameworks for promoting the learning experiences of students with special needs, and so on.<sup>8</sup>

This curricular reform attracted a lot of public attention, not only among experts but among parents, students, and many other citizens who wanted some positive changes in a country then devastated by economic crisis, divided over ideological issues, and drowned in apathy and cynicism. The attention was also due to public appearances of a young scientist, psychologist Boris Jokic, the non-party member who led the Expert Work Group, whose optimistic messages focused on the wellbeing of children were welcomed by many.

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<sup>7</sup>Documents are available online: <https://mzo.hr/hr/rubrike/odluke-o-imenovanju>.

<sup>8</sup>See: the proposal for the National Framework Curriculum, as well as the framework curricula for elementary school, gymnasium, and vocational education. All documents are available online: <http://www.kurikulum.hr/dokumenti-nacionalnih-kurikuluma/>.

Under the SDP-led coalition government a parallel process aimed to develop new curricula for vocational schools. This was initiated by Croatia's Agency for Vocational Education<sup>9</sup> in 2011 and was financed by the EU Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) funds. It resulted in the creation of new vocational curricula for twenty-four professions that were experimentally introduced in certain schools in the 2013–2014 school year. In 2015–2016 an external evaluation of the experimental implementation took place (Nacionalni centar za vanjsko vrednovanje obrazovanja 2017). Meanwhile the Strategy envisaged a comprehensive reform of education, which included not only compulsory education and high schools, but also vocational education, meaning two endeavors to reform vocational education proceeded in parallel. However, the new curricula for vocational schools developed by the Agency for Vocational Education were not approved before the school year 2017–2018—the moment when it seemed that the CKR had been brought to a halt for an indefinite period of time.<sup>10</sup>

Once again, shifts in the political scene proved decisive for the future of education reform. Less than three months after the groups began their work under the Strategy, in November 2015 general elections were held that eventually resulted in a change of government. A conservative coalition of parties and groups (ranging from moderate, center-right groups to far-right groups that based their program on rigid nationalism and social conservatism), led by the HDZ, formed a government in January 2016. Some groups in the governing coalition immediately declared that they wanted to halt the CKR.<sup>11</sup> The government officially announced that it would continue, but very quickly made decisions that

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<sup>9</sup>The full name is the Agency for Vocational Education and Training and Adult Education. It is a public institution founded in 2010, which takes care of the development of vocational education system and curricula, as well as adult education. Retrieved from <http://www.asoo.hr/default.aspx?id=100>.

<sup>10</sup>Altogether nineteen new vocational curricula were approved by ministerial decision between June 16 and August 28, 2017. See: *Narodne novine: službeni list RH*, no. 58/2017, 68/2017, 71/2017, 74/2017, 77/2017, 78/2017, 79/2017, 82/2017, 83/2017, 84/2017, 85/2017. Also available online: <https://www.nn.hr/>.

<sup>11</sup>Only a few days after its establishment, the new government announced guidelines for its future actions on the Parliament website. These included demands to stop the curricular reform and to revise the Strategy. The government quickly denied this and offered the explanation that the wrong document was mistakenly published on the website. See, for example: *24 sata* (2016).

effectively stopped its implementation. Most of the financial and material support for the reform process was discontinued. Education was then left to the influence of marginal right-wing parties in the ruling coalition, as well as to groups and individuals associated with the Catholic Church, ultraconservative non-government associations and some war veterans' organizations.<sup>12</sup> These groups wanted to add new members to the Expert Work Group and the other groups, to ensure that their views would be reflected in the curriculum documents. In May 2016, when the parliamentary committee on education, controlled by the ruling coalition, proposed adding ten new members to the seven-person Expert Work Group, all seven members resigned.<sup>13</sup> The resignation of the Expert Work Group triggered the mass protests all over Croatia on July 1, 2016. The protestors voiced opposition to political meddling in education reform.<sup>14</sup>

In an attempt to reach a national consensus on curricular documents, the Expert Work Group had originally planned a large consultation process consisting of an expert discussion and a general public consultation. Almost 3000 experts (teachers, education experts, scientists, and so on), either individually or as members of institutions, participated in the expert discussion that began in March 2016. Without going into details on individual subjects, general remarks and questions often referred to the orientation of curricular documents on outcomes and student achievements, instead of to the detailed description of content which is a common characteristic of the existing curricula. The proposal to extend compulsory education from eight to nine years won wide support among the experts, but reactions to the proposal that students in the final grades of gymnasium could choose between subjects according to their interests were divided. There were also many comments about the role of STEM subjects, the role of the humanities and arts, the content

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<sup>12</sup>See, for example: *Poslovi.hr* (2016). For articles in English, see: Milekic (2016).

<sup>13</sup>See: the webpage of the Croatian Parliament, Parliamentary Committee for education, science and culture, conclusions from the meeting held on May 19, 2016: <http://www.sabor.hr/radna-tijela/odbori-i-povjerenstva/zakljucci-odbora-za-obrazovanje-znanost-i-kulturu-s-tematske>.

<sup>14</sup>The resignation of the Expert Working Group was extensively covered in the Croatian media, but also discussed internationally. For articles published in English, see: *Reuters* (2016), Milekic (2016), *The Economist* (2016), Kovačić (2016), Marini (2016), Šošić (2016).



of civic and health education, and so on. Teachers' comments showed general concern about how the planned changes would affect their jobs and their everyday work.<sup>15</sup>

Based on comments from the expert discussions, work groups developed new versions of documents (almost without any official support, as explained in the previous paragraph). The online general public consultation<sup>16</sup> about these new versions of documents launched in June 2016 and lasted until November 2016, but the response was much weaker. This might be due to the fact that the consultation process was used by political opponents of the CKR to launch orchestrated attacks against it. The political backlash against the reform proposal, and some members of the Expert Work Group and other work groups, cast a shadow over the consultation process and hindered constructive debate about the curricular documents. Specific criticisms of the curriculum proposals for the “national subjects,” such as history and Croatian language, as well as civic education, were used politically to stir up public sentiments and undermine the reform as a whole. Some members of the HAZU, university professors, and researchers from scientific institutes were also directly involved in these political attempts to stop the reform, with ideological, personal, or institutional motives.

The 2016 debate on the curricular reform in general, and the curricula of “national subjects” in particular, happened in the period when, after the completion of the EU accession process, a renewed trend of nationalism emerged. This was evident in the 2014–2015 presidential and parliamentary elections and in the months following the parliamentary elections. Among other things, derogatory terms were used by right-wing parties to label their political opponents to the left as people who,

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<sup>15</sup>For the contributions to the expert discussion, as well as answers from the work groups, see: the official web page of the CKR: [http://www.kurikulum.hr/?s=odgovor+stru%C4%8Dne+radne+skupine&fbclid=IwAR33m\\_y-MMnkG5vMviN-TziKdoq8Vafk6DnlBoJ6ZpKqF0vy1Jodgzx9Zc](http://www.kurikulum.hr/?s=odgovor+stru%C4%8Dne+radne+skupine&fbclid=IwAR33m_y-MMnkG5vMviN-TziKdoq8Vafk6DnlBoJ6ZpKqF0vy1Jodgzx9Zc).

<sup>16</sup>“Consultation with the interested public” is part of the process of adopting new laws and other regulations. There are various methods to conduct a public consultation (e.g., organizing public discussions, conducting surveys), but the method of online public consultation is mostly used. Public authorities are required to publish draft laws and other acts on the e-Counseling website, usually for a period of thirty days, and citizens can write their comments and suggestions.

they claimed, never wanted an independent Croatia—such as “Yugonostalgics,” “Yugophiles,” “Yugoslavs,” “reds,” and “communists.” Fostering national identity and socially conservative views and values has again become the central political goal of right-wing parties in culture and education (Koren 2015, 13–16). In this political context, the authors of the Croatian language curriculum were accused of attempting to undermine Croatian national identity because of their effort to modernize the reading list, while the documents dealing with civic and health education were disqualified for allegedly promoting “gender ideology,” *pro-choice* views, and same-sex marriage.<sup>17</sup> The proposed history curriculum was labeled, directly or indirectly, as “ideologized,” “anti-Croat,” “pro-Yugoslav,” and “Titoist.” It was also criticized because, according to the critics, it did not provide enough national history (the curriculum proposed an equal ratio of Croatian and world history—at least 40 percent of each—and 20 percent of content was left for teachers to decide). Here are some examples of this kind of criticism.

An excerpt from a newspaper column written by a historian (Banac 2016):

Only one question remains, who planted this on Tomislav Karamarko [a leader of the HDZ at the time]... It could be concluded that the necessary interpretative changes, in fact decommunization, do not accompany the methodological innovations of the proposal for history teaching. This equally applies to the interpretation of the history of Croatian identity and the national question in all modern states in this territory. Perhaps this proposal will currently succeed in defending the continuity of apology for and ideologemes of Titoism, but the historians’ guild will sooner or later need to explain why it is so. Can the methodology replace the necessary content of the reform?<sup>18</sup>

From a historian’s contribution to the expert debate:

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<sup>17</sup>For examples, see: Jerković (2016), Starešina (2016), Cvrtila (2016a), *Kamenjar.com* (2017), *Direktno.hr* (2016), *Hrvatsko katoličko društvo prosvjetnih djelatnika* (2017), *Vjera i djela* (2016).

<sup>18</sup>See also: the answer: Koren (2016).

Considering that the third topic, *World War II on the territory of Yugoslavia*, deals with “exploring the multiple causes and course of World War II on the territory of Yugoslavia with the focus on the situation in Croatia [...],” I see no reason to mention in the title of that topic the state that disappeared in the whirlwind of World War II, and even more because 90 percent of this topic is dedicated to the situation in Croatia.<sup>19</sup>

The commentary of a historian and a director of the Croatian Memorial-Documentation Centre of the Homeland War, during the discussion about the history curriculum proposal at the Croatian Institute of History:

For me, it is unacceptable that the share of national history has been reduced from 60 percent in the current curriculum to 40 percent in the new curriculum, equally as world history. One cannot prescribe national history below 50 percent. Although the topic of the Homeland War [the 1991–1995 war] is mandatory and the number of lessons is increased, what does it mean that 20 percent of the content is left for the teachers to decide? I’m afraid that the problematic topics, such as World War II and the Homeland War, will be avoided. Are we supposed to let teachers to use sources themselves and consequently to have a history based on newspapers, fiction, web portals? Or shall we, finally, fully present transcripts from the Office of the President and questions related to Croatia’s role in Bosnia and Herzegovina?<sup>20</sup>

An excerpt from the commentary of a historian during the discussion about the history curriculum proposal at the Croatian Institute of History:

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<sup>19</sup>The commentary of Ante Birin in *Odgovori na pristigle priloge stručnoj raspravi o prijedlogu Nacionalnog kurikuluma nastavnog predmeta Povijest*, p. 224. Available online: <http://www.kurikulum.hr/page/3/?s=odgovor+stru%C4%8Dne+radne+skupine>.

<sup>20</sup>This commentary of Ante Nazor is quoted in: Cvrtila (2016b). The last sentence of the commentary refers to the transcripts of talks led by Croatian President Franjo Tuđman with his associates, partners, and other political actors from Croatia and abroad between 1990 and 1999. These talks were taped and their transcripts appeared in public after Tuđman’s death. They contain sensitive political material usually not available for public usage. Some excerpts and even whole transcripts were published in newspapers and books (see, for example: Lucić 2005). Some excerpts were used as evidence during the some ICTY trials, specifically those of Bosnian Croats.

Ideologies are an integral part of our professional and social reality, but they must not be one-sided ideologies. That is one thing. And here you have pronouncedly one-sided ideology. I'll just tell you one thing. In your document, Yugoslavia is mentioned thirteen times ... it's easy, search the document by search engine ... and Hungary four times. Croatia was, or some forms of Croatia, in union with Hungary for 816 years, while the Yugoslav state lasted sixty-nine years. What are we talking about?<sup>21</sup>

Teaching the “Homeland War”—this is how the 1991–1995 war is officially referred to in Croatia, for example in the Croatian Constitution—was another important point in these debates. In the years following the end of the conflict, it has acquired an important place in official memory and has increasingly been portrayed as a key event in Croatian history. In 2000, the Croatian Parliament issued a Declaration on the Homeland War, which provides an official interpretation: Croatia “led a just and legitimate, defensive and liberating war and not a war of conquest and aggression against anyone; it defended its territory from the Great Serbian aggression, within its internationally recognized borders.”<sup>22</sup> A similar sentence was added to the Croatian Constitution in 2010 (in “Part I: Historical foundations”). Narratives about this war entered the history textbooks almost immediately, in 1992, and were very much in tune with the official memory of it. Only after 2000 did some textbooks begin to offer more complex narratives (for example, by mentioning crimes committed by Croats during the war). At the same time, some veterans’ associations and political groups have increasingly demanded that more time and space in curricula, textbooks, and teaching be dedicated to this topic. It is now usually taught for between three and five class hours, and textbooks usually dedicate between twenty and thirty pages to post-1980s Croatian history. But critics continually insist that existing curricula and textbooks do not pay enough attention to teaching the

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<sup>21</sup>The commentary of Mladen Ančić during the discussion about the proposed history curriculum in the Croatian Institute for History took place on April 22, 2016. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w4ZvQrLDdgY>, 2:02:40–2:04:09.

<sup>22</sup>For the text of the Declaration, see: *Narodne novine* 102/2000: [https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2000\\_10\\_102\\_1987.html](https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2000_10_102_1987.html).

1991–1995 war and that mandatory terminology and the official interpretations of it must be used.

Regarding the proposed new history curriculum, the critics insisted that the curriculum did not pay enough attention to the war, even though it provided at least twice as many school hours than before for teaching the topic. They also maintained that it would be necessary to strictly and thoroughly prescribe the content and “proper” interpretations of topics related to the war. One paragraph of the curriculum—one word in one paragraph, to be more precise—was strongly criticized by some historians, conservative civil society organizations, and even by some members of the Croatian Parliament:

The student explores the processes of forming the independent Croatian state after 1990, including the democratic, political, and economic transformation of the Croatian state and society, the Homeland War, armed conflicts in *(post)Yugoslav space* [emphasis added], and Croatia's inclusion in international integration. The emphasis is on the period from the beginning of the Homeland War to the peaceful reintegration of the Danube basin region: on the causes of the war, key military operations, peace initiatives, different experiences of people during the war, and military and civilian war victims. The student explores the causes and consequences of these events and analyzes sources, including personal testimonies of contemporaries.<sup>23</sup>

Here are some examples of how the critics explained why they consider this term problematic.

An excerpt from the commentary of a historian and a director of the Croatian Memorial-Documentation Centre of the Homeland War on public television:

Let me be clear, if we today, in 2016, are talking about armed conflicts in the post-Yugoslav space, then I do not know who made it. If the framework curriculum looks more like the Yugoslav curriculum rather than the

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<sup>23</sup>*Nacionalni kurikulum nastavnoga predmeta Povijest: prijedlog*, February 2016, 51. Available as pdf document on: <http://www.kurikulum.hr/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Povijest.pdf>.

Croatian curriculum, then I do not know who the expert is and what is politics.<sup>24</sup>

An excerpt from a comment on the general public consultation:

But why do we mention and how much longer will we mention the (post)Yugoslav space? Both [King] Alexander's and Tito's Yugoslavia lasted together only for seventy years. If we stubbornly insist on the post-spaces, why wouldn't we in the case of the war in Slovenia, and even in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, talk about the (post)Austro-Hungarian space, or in the case of Kosovo about the (post)Ottoman space? Are we finally going to get away from that wretched Yugoslavia?<sup>25</sup>

An excerpt from a teacher's comment during the expert debate:

rename the topic on page 51—replace the title *World War II on the territory of Yugoslavia* with *World War II on Croatian territory* (also p. 52 post-Yugoslav space); try to avoid propagating different ideologies through the content of the curriculum.<sup>26</sup>

The history curriculum was also criticized because, according to critics, it allowed too much autonomy for teachers to choose content and topics. There were also complaints that content was missing from the curriculum, as well as demands to elaborate each particular topic in detail.<sup>27</sup> The proposed curriculum defined students' progression in history not

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<sup>24</sup>This claim by Ante Nazor was made during the political TV show *Otvoreno* on Croatian Television on May 25, 2016. For the footage, see: <https://vijesti.hrt.hr/336501/otvoreno-zastojec-boris-jokic-dao-ostavku> (accessed January 6, 2019). See also: the polemics between Ante Nazor and Jurica Pavičić regarding the proposal of the history curriculum: Pavičić (2016a, b), Nazor (2016). Also: Pavičić (2017).

<sup>25</sup>This is a commentary from the contribution to the general public consultation from a conservative civil society association, In the Name of the Family. See: <https://esavjetovanja.gov.hr/ECon/MainScreen?entityId=3745> (accessed January 6, 2019).

<sup>26</sup>See: *Odgovori na pristigle priloge stručnoj raspravi o prijedlogu Nacionalnog kurikuluma nastavnog predmeta Povijest*, p. 38. Available online: <http://www.kurikulum.hr/page/3?s=odgovor+stru%C4%8Dne+radne+skupine>.

<sup>27</sup>A 2007 study showed that the Croatian curricula were among the most prescriptive in Europe. See: Koren and Najbar-Agičić (2007). In the Croatian context, such a detailed prescription of contents always increases the risk of obligatory interpretations and official versions of history.

only in terms of detailed factual knowledge, but also in terms of students gradually developing generic skills and deeper understanding of concepts of historical thinking that applied to each topic provided, such as time and space, causes and consequences, continuity and change, historical sources and historical enquiry, and interpretations and perspectives. It is interesting to note that some professional historians were strongly against the inclusion of “sources and enquiry” and “interpretations and perspectives” among the organizing concepts of the history curriculum. Lacking knowledge of the constructivist learning theories that underlined the curriculum, they mistakenly equated enquiry-based learning strategies with scientific research, leading them to conclude that the concepts, as well as curriculum objectives using phrases such as “students investigate the past,” were unrealistic and too difficult for primary and secondary school students’ cognitive abilities. Analyzing historical sources and comparing different interpretations and perspectives of the past were not only deemed “too difficult,” however, but also as a “relativization of history,” an idea which stems from perceiving the main purpose of (school) history as transferring “proper” interpretations of the past.<sup>28</sup>

After only 146 days, however, the HDZ-led government lost support in the Parliament. Its deep unpopularity came not only from the stalled curricular reform. It was inefficient and incapable of implementing any important decision; at the same time, it deepened ideological rifts in society through the radical rhetoric of some of its prominent members, threatened freedom of expression, and put political pressure on state-funded public media. Snap elections ensued and a more moderate, center-right government (still led by the HDZ, but with a new president) took office. This government initially continued the policy of its predecessor towards the CKR. It officially resumed the reform, but tried to do it with different people who rejected certain key ideas in the original reform proposal. An attempt to select a new Expert Work

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<sup>28</sup>See: *Odgovori na pristigle priloge stručnoj raspravi o prijedlogu Nacionalnog kurikuluma nastavnog predmeta Povijest*: <http://www.kurikulum.hr/page/3/?s=odgovor+stru%C4%8Dne+radne+skupine>, contributions to the general public consultation: <https://esavjetovanja.gov.hr/ECon/MainScreen?entityId=3745> and the discussion about the proposal of the history curriculum in the Croatian Institute for History, April 22, 2016: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w4ZvQrLDdGY>.

Group in April 2017 failed because of procedural irregularities.<sup>29</sup> This led to another massive protest exactly a year after the first, on 1 July 2017. Demonstrators demanded the dismissal of the minister of education, who had been compromised by numerous scandals, along with some of those appointed to run the reform process.<sup>30</sup> When the government was reconstructed in June 2017, the minister was replaced by a non-party academic who was charged with the task of pushing the reform forward. During the government reconstruction, the HDZ made a coalition deal with the liberal Croatian People's Party (HNS), representatives of national minorities and a few smaller parties to remain in power and avoid a second snap election in less than a year. As a junior partner in the government, the HNS got two ministries, one being the Ministry of Education. The HNS endorsed the new non-party minister of education and the party leadership said the principal reason its entered the ruling coalition was to secure continuation of the CKR. The Ministry of Education took control of the reform process and started to prepare an experimental implementation to test the curriculum proposals in some schools.

Because of controversies over the reform, the Ministry of Education announced it would ask for international reviews for most of the subject curricula,<sup>31</sup> except history and Croatian language, which, as “national subjects,” were supposed to be reviewed primarily by Croatian experts. The Croatian language curriculum was ultimately reviewed by the HAZU, and the history curriculum by both the HAZU and the Bavarian Ministry of Education. The history curriculum received a positive review from the Bavarian ministry, with a couple of suggested improvements—among them a suggestion that “the cross-community and cross-regional focus of the curriculum” as well as “the role of women

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<sup>29</sup>For the appointments, see: the web page of the Ministry of Education: <https://mzo.hr/hr/rubrike/odluke-o-imenovanju>.

<sup>30</sup>The second protest was also well covered in the Croatian media. For articles in English, see: Milekic (2017).

<sup>31</sup>So far, the curricula have been sent for review to the British Council (English Language), France (French Language), Slovenia (Mathematics, Geography, Physical Education), Estonia (Nature and Society, Biology, Computer Science), Finland (Technical Culture, Music), Austria (Computer Science), UK (Computer Science), and Italy (Latin Language). For reviews, see: the website of the Ministry of Education: <https://mzo.hr/hr/rubrike/>.



and minorities” could be made much stronger.<sup>32</sup> It received barely a passing review from the HAZU, however, which essentially asked that a new draft of the proposal be prepared.<sup>33</sup> In the end, the Ministry of Education accepted both curricula with some minor changes, and both are included in the pilot project, called the “School for Life,” for the school year 2018/2019. According to the ministry’s plans, after a year of experimental implementation, new curricula should be implemented in all primary and secondary schools for the school year 2019/2020.

Still, there are many obstacles and a lot of criticism about the whole reform process, from various points of view. On one side, there are those who warn that many of the ideas from the original reform proposal have not been implemented.<sup>34</sup> The extension of compulsory education from eight to nine grades is no longer mentioned in legislative documents that support the reform process, and nor is the National Framework Curriculum as a key document. During the experimental phase, the focus is on implementing subject curricula and not comprehensive curricular reform. On the other side, those to the right of the political and ideological spectrum wanted to stop the liberal reform of education from the beginning, or at least take control of the process.

Much still remains uncertain because of the inter-party dynamics in the ruling coalition. Tensions already surfaced between the coalition partners during the election of the members of the new Expert Work Group. It was finally formed in April 2018, but due to disagreements on who would lead the group, the prime minister appointed a special advisor to coordinate its work (a high-ranking HDZ member who had been

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<sup>32</sup>For the review, see: the website of the Ministry of Education: <https://mzo.hr/hr/rubrike/>.

<sup>33</sup>The HAZU was included in the review process as the most important scientific institution in the country, although among its 160 academics who are experts in their respective fields of study none are specialists in educational sciences. A group of historians from HAZU signed the review of the history curriculum. According to the response of the History Work Group, there were several misplaced and flawed comments and conclusions in the HAZU review. For both the review and the response, see: <https://mzo.hr/hr/rubrike/>. For other comments on the reviews, see: <http://www.historiografija.hr/?p=9314>.

<sup>34</sup>See, for example: Kršul (2018), *Jutarnji list* (2018).

minister of education in 2009–2011).<sup>35</sup> A majority of the group's members was made up of those who wanted to ensure substantial review of the existing documents. Recent developments also point to negotiations and compromises over the reform within the ruling coalition. From mid-November to mid-December 2018, the Ministry of Education opened another general public consultation, this time about the decision to implement the new subject curricula in the school year 2019/2020. In comparison, curricula for vocational schools were approved in summer 2017 and implemented in schools without any public consultation.

The majority of the roughly fifty comments received<sup>36</sup> about the history curriculum proposal during the new general public consultation were positive. Most teachers, including those from experimental schools, positively evaluated the new student-centered approach, active learning methods, development of critical thinking and teachers' autonomy, as well as the reduction of prescribed content and number of topics. There were some questions and concerns among teachers on how the proposed teacher autonomy and possibility to choose among the proposed topics would affect textbook production and state exams. Most indicated the need for further education.<sup>37</sup>

The reactions of the academic community, however, were strongly divided on issues such as teachers' autonomy and, most of all, the purpose of school history. Some academic historians strongly advocated limiting teachers' autonomy and demonstrated mistrust in teachers as educated professionals. For some, the main purpose of learning and teaching history is to instill patriotism and shape students' national identity (for example, Ante Nazor, a historian and director of the Croatian Memorial Documentation Center of the Homeland War, specified "the importance of nurturing national identity, and strengthening the feeling and awareness of belonging to the Croatian people and towards

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<sup>35</sup>See: the decision on the appointment of twelve members of the Expert Working Group for the implementation of curriculum reform on the website of the Ministry of Education, April 17, 2018: [https://mzo.hr/sites/default/files/dokumenti/2018/OBRAZOVANJE/Nacionalni-kurikulumi/odluka\\_o\\_imenovanju\\_clanova\\_ers-a\\_17.4.2018.pdf](https://mzo.hr/sites/default/files/dokumenti/2018/OBRAZOVANJE/Nacionalni-kurikulumi/odluka_o_imenovanju_clanova_ers-a_17.4.2018.pdf).

<sup>36</sup>For the comments, see: <https://esavjetovanja.gov.hr/ECon/MainScreen?entityId=9427>.

<sup>37</sup>Contributions to the general public consultation are available on the government website *esavjetovanja.com*, from which the following excerpts are taken: <https://esavjetovanja.gov.hr/ECon/MainScreen?entityId=9427>. For media reactions, see: Ponoš (2018).

the political and ethnic territory of the Croats”). Others supported the views of the authors of the history curriculum proposal who define learning history as the critical pursuit of knowledge about the past. Here are some examples of these different views.

From the statement of a group of teachers from the History Department of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Science in Zagreb:

As teachers of the History Department of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Science in Zagreb—the oldest and largest Croatian scientific-educational institution that educates future history teachers—we emphasize that, in accordance with the democratic foundations of the European Union, education should be free and critical, and it should encourage constant questioning of national narratives, societies, and the world we live in.

An excerpt from the statement of the History Department of University of Zadar:

The proposed history curriculum for high school is opposed to the idea of creating a coherent national narrative, and thus opposed to the fundamental values of the Republic of Croatia as a national state [...]

An excerpt from the commentary of historian Mario Kevo from the History Department of the Croatian Catholic University in Zagreb:

history as a school subject must be seen as crucial in preserving the “mental health” of future generations focused on expression of the longevity of the identity of a nation. It requires a meta-narrative about the past, which is formed through professional consensus and properly and timely mediated in teaching. Only this understanding of the past is meaningful to the school population, future stakeholders and bearers of Croatian social reality. Only a small part of that population, who will opt to study history at the university, will be fully acquainted with the concepts of shaping images of the past reality.

An excerpt from the statement of the Croatian History Teachers’ Organization:

More thorough work on individual topics will enable more efficient development of critical thinking skills, which has declaratively been one of the goals of history teaching in Croatia for a long time.

From the commentary of Nazor, director of the Croatian Memorial-Documentation Centre for the Homeland War:

Although this review of the history curriculum does not deal with civic education, I think that the name “homeland education” would be much more appropriate for this subject. Along with the topics that are now anticipated, its curriculum should also include topics important for understanding issues of national security. These issues are completely neglected in the proposed curricula in Croatian schools, although they are very important, especially because there is no compulsory military service in Croatia.

The Ministry of Education also announced a call for new work groups to revise the subject curricula and improve the documents according to the comments received during the public consultation. The education minister was able to appoint one member of each of the former work groups who drafted the original proposal in the new groups, while the new Expert Work Group chose the other members. The majority of the history work group was made up of those who had previously strongly criticized the curriculum proposal.<sup>38</sup> Instead of improving the existing document, the group developed—in less than one month—a completely new proposal. This new document was endorsed by the Expert Work Group, but the minister of education initially refused to accept it, declaring as a reason for this decision a dissatisfaction with the huge quantity of content and the “relativization of the Holocaust.”<sup>39</sup> In February 2019, the document was sent to a new public consultation; it received more than 300 comments and extensive media coverage.<sup>40</sup> It provoked many negative reactions, especially among teachers, because of its prescriptive

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<sup>38</sup>For the members of the new history work group, see: Ministry of Science and Education (2018). For media reactions, see: Šimičević (2018). For the reaction of the Ministry of Education to the article, see: *Novosti* (2018).

<sup>39</sup>See, for example: *Jutarnji list* (2019).

<sup>40</sup>For the comments, see: <https://esavjetovanja.gov.hr/ECon/MainScreen?entityId=10217>.

and normative character, a huge increase in the overall number of topics, and its disregard for the plurality of interpretative perspectives (particularly with regard to the presentation of the 1990s war). Among academic historians, however, opinions were again divided, especially on the role of history teaching in shaping national identity. Extensive contributions from several history departments and institutes point not only at academic historians' diverging views of the purpose of school history, but also of the nature of history as an academic discipline.

After the completion of the public consultation, the minister added another three historians to the existing work group and charged the group with finalizing the document in a two-week period, on the basis of the second proposal. During the government session on 15 March 2019, the prime minister announced that the history curriculum was completed and that the history work group had achieved "a quality consensus." He emphasized that all members of the government, regardless of their political philosophy, could support this document, which is "its real value." Two sentences from his speech were posted on the government's official Twitter account (@VladaRH, March 15, 2019):

Sensitive topics from 20th century history, like the Holocaust, are appropriately represented in the new curriculum in undoubtedly democratic and unbiased manner towards any totalitarian and authoritarian system.

Similarly, the topic of the Homeland War, which is the starting point of sovereign Croatia, is in this curriculum covered appropriately and comprehensively, in accordance with the parliamentary Declaration on the Homeland War.

Although the prime minister emphasized the professional, not political, character of the document, his words, and the whole process, show otherwise: a deep and thorough politicization of history teaching in Croatia, especially topics from twentieth-century history.

## Conclusion

The impact of this document on history teaching remains to be seen, as well as the impact of other curricular documents on the reform process as a whole. Taking into account the political back-and-forth on the education reform so far and the evident lack of broad political support for implementing the more substantial changes, we still cannot be sure what kind of reform will be implemented in the school-year 2019/20, and whether it will be just another missed opportunity for Croatia.

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