

Euroregions and transborder co-operation in Polish textbooks

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Abstract

The reform of schooling system in Poland is coming to an end. First gymnasium (grammar school) textbooks (1999–2000) were written on the basis of earlier textbooks and their authors discussed the issues of international co-operation of states and bigger economic blocs. EU and NATO were important subjects as well (it was the time of the adherence of Poland to the latter organisation). The issues of transborder co-operation were present in geography programmes of the ‘new Polish secondary school’, and in a more limited sense in the programme of social science. On one hand geographers understand the local issues better, on the other the authors of textbooks are guided by the “Programme basis...”, official document issued by the Ministry of National Education in 2002. Considering the importance of co-operation and the fact that not all the young people continue their education in lyceum (secondary school), problems of international co-operation should be discussed widely on the level of grammar schools. Some of the textbooks edited and published in 2001–2002 already fulfil those requirements.

Key words: Euroregions, transborder co-operation, Poland, textbooks

The reform of the educational system in Poland is approaching the end. Until 1999 the primary school consisted of eight grades. In 1999 the pupils, having finished the 6th grade of the primary school, entered for the first time the three-year gymnasium. Then, after having finished gymnasium, in 2002, they entered the three-year lyceum. The reform will be terminated with the new secondary school certificate examination in 2005, which will be carried out according to the unified standards across the country, checked out outside of the school by the independent examiners, and will replace – except for just a handful of cases – the entry examinations to the universities and other high schools.

The educational reform assumes a thorough change in the contents and methods of teaching. In the current Polish educational system geography is present at the so-called IIIrd and IVth educational levels, that is – in the gymnasium and in the schools of the subsequent level. Within the IInd educational level (higher grades of the new primary school) selected geographical themes are being taught in the framework of the integrated subject of “Nature”. Yet, in this case the inclusion of geography among natural sciences means an almost complete lack of space for the questions of human geography.

From the point of view of teaching of geography the key significance ought to be assigned to the gymnasium level, since it encompasses all children. Although after having finished gymnasium all pupils ought to continue learning, a part of the young, alas, is being “lost”. The education following the gymnasium is differentiated, including lyceums, technical schools and trade schools. At this level, beyond the gymnasium,

geography is present everywhere, as since 2002 the subject called “geography and nature protection” has become obligatory also for all the trade schools, the scope of the subject suggesting the opportunity for domination of geography over this important field.

The fundamental documents, defining the objectives and the contents of teaching, as well as the expected achievements of the pupils, are constituted by the very general program prerequisites, published separately for the gymnasium (in 1999) and for the schools of the higher level (in 2001) by the Ministry of National Education. They serve as the basis for construction of teaching curricula, and then of handbooks. The contents of teaching of geography encompass in the basic program prerequisite specification meant for the gymnasium ten points, including:

5. *Contemporary economic, social and political transformations on the continents and in selected countries.*
8. *Poland against the background of Europe and the world.*
9. *Problems of integration in the world, in Europe and in Poland.*

It could be expected that within the framework set by these points, and first of all – point 9, the teaching on the Euroregions and on the cross-border co-operation will develop.

Such an expectation would insofar yet be justified that the program prerequisites envisage the introduction of the so-called “interdisciplinary paths”. The directors of the schools are obliged to implement them, either in the framework of the traditional school subjects, by appropriately increasing the numbers of hours, devoted to them (this solution being recommended), or by the establishment of separate subjects for the “paths”, most often in the form of “module teaching”. There are seven such paths for the gymnasium, including *regional education* and *European education*. Each of the paths has an own curriculum prerequisite specification. One might therefore expect that these documents would contain the indication of the need of turning attention to the Euroregions and the cross-border co-operation. It is with surprise that we note the virtual lack of space for these issues.

Thus, the teaching contents for the regional education path includes the item:

2. *The role of the region and its connections with other regions of Poland,* but its formulation would rather suggest that the relations with the regions outside of Poland could be omitted. On the other hand, the objectives, contents and achievements of the European education are inscribed in a very general manner, with emphasis placed more on the cultural roots as well as the history of emergence and extension of the European Union. The regional approach does not appear in the program prerequisites for this path. It appears, though, in some gymnasium curricula and handbooks, especially those elaborated by the geographers (see M. Bartoszewska, 2000). The issues of interest to us here are not contained, either, in the program specifications for teaching of history, nor in the framework of the subject of “knowledge of the society”. The latter subject encompasses three blocks, including “preparation to an active participation in economic life”, oriented at the acquisition of very pragmatic skills (like job search, CV writing, managing own money), as well as “civil education”. The objectives formulated for this block include the following items:

2. *Awareness of existence of obligations with respect to the home country, including, in particular, the duty of defending it and caring for its good fame;*

and

4. *Understanding the important events of the social, political and economic life in the country and in the world.*

And in terms of the matter taught:

3. *The nation and the state. National identity.*

4. *Constitutional monarchies and republics in contemporary Europe.*

5. *The citizen and the public authority in the totalitarian, authoritative and democratic systems.*

7. *Territorial self-governments and central authorities.*

Allowing for an essential input of good will and owing to quite a free development of the curricula from the side of the authors, one can potentially find here some room for the questions of the cross-border co-operation, even if just in terms of comparison of the systems functioning in various neighbouring countries, problems of formation of national identity among the peoples inhabiting borderlands (by the way: a fascinating issue, received by pupils with high interest), or reference to the not so old experience of the totalitarian rule and the subsequent transformations in the respective countries. It is especially within the latter problem area that a place for the notion of Euroregion might have been found – also in terms of a legal and administrative unit. In vain, though. None of the gymnasium handbooks of the knowledge of the society even touches upon these issues. The pupils are fed the information on Poland as their own country (and rightly so!), on the fact that Poland is in Europe (true!), and that there are also other countries in Europe (like the monarchies – for instance Norway and United Kingdom, and republics – France, Finland and Czech Republic). Sometimes a handbook offers yet a table listing European monarchies and republics (see Gensler, Marciniak, 2000). Each of these countries, though, appears as an isolated entity in European space. Poland included.

Hence, at the gymnasium level geography remains the virtually sole source of information on what is going on outside of the boundaries of Poland. Does it, though, fulfil this mission in a satisfactory manner?

Polish educational system admits, in any subject taught, an arbitrary number of curricula and handbooks. They just have to satisfy the program prerequisites, this fact being verified by the referees designated by the Ministry of National Education and Sports. In conditions of a sharp market competition some 20 companies publish the handbooks of geography, which are used in gymnasiums. The market got saturated and the weaker of these firms are going bankrupt. The abundance of the proposed teaching materials is, however, only quite apparent – the authors of the curricula and of the handbooks in their majority know each other and each other's opinions well, while the rapid pace of introduction of the reform at the gymnasium level caused that in many cases direct use was made of the earlier handbooks for the primary school (grades 6th to 8th). These handbooks were sometimes simply quite uncritically modified. Consequently, A. Stańczyk (2001), who analysed most of the curricula, though not all of them, could state that "...all the curricula analysed by me (12) are based on similar principles".

Thus, the first handbooks for the gymnasium, published in the years 1999–2000, arose most often on the basis of the previous handbooks for the primary school, and the issues of international co-operation were presented in them with respect to the entire

countries and economic blocks. A lot of space was devoted in these handbooks to the European Union and NATO (this was exactly the period of the Polish accession to NATO and the beginnings of the official attempts of joining the EU). The countries neighbouring upon Poland were described, usually with omission of the question of border co-operation, and in particular – of the Euroregions. The typical examples of such an approach may be provided by the then published handbooks of the publishing house Wydawnictwa Szkolne i Pedagogiczne (School and Pedagogical Publishing House). Thus, the handbook of the world geography by F. Plit (2000) contains a lot of information on integration in Europe, and on the regionalisms in the particular countries of the European Union, but no mention of the Euroregions. Any mention! This cycle of teaching is continued with the handbook of the regional geography of Poland by S. Zając (2000). The publishing house Nowa Era (New Era) published the cycle of as many as four handbooks for the gymnasium. The problems of Euroregions could have found a place in as many as three of them: in the handbook of geography of Poland (Szlajfer, 2000), in the “Socio-economic problems of the world” (Czerny and Czerny, 2000), where ample chapters were devoted to the contemporary socio-political and economic transformations, and in “World. Europe. Poland” (Powęska, Rościszewski, Szlajfer, 2001). The latter handbook, conform to its subtitle, is meant for both teaching of geography and for the European education. Alas, when speaking of the geography of Poland no mention was made of the Euroregions, nor of other forms of co-operation between the border regions, and in the teaching of the geography of the world countries appear as monolithic. A similar silence characterises the handbooks published by other firms.¹

The awareness of the shortcoming indicated came very soon. The attempts of resolving the problem were twofold. **First**, very strong emphasis was placed on the regional dimension of integration in the teaching at the lyceum level. The “Program basis for the general education...”, introduced by the Ministry of National Education in 2001 mentions, among other items to be taught, “The processes of transition from isolation to integration; collaboration among the societies; processes of integration and disintegration in Europe (with special consideration of the role of Poland); Euroregions and twinned towns (communes), as the examples of international collaboration at the regional and local levels”. Euroregions had been a subject of teaching at the lyceum level yet before the introduction of the reform, while the twinned towns and communes (the handbooks refer to them, anyway, in quite a variety of manners) constitute a complete novelty in the curricula of geography in Poland.

The matter mentioned concerns the so-called basic course, that is – obligatory for all the students of the lyceums. The first new handbooks for the lyceum were published in 2002. Almost all of them present the map of Euroregions, which are located along the boundaries of Poland (Makowska, ed., 2002; Mordawski, Wiecki, 2002). Such a map appears even in the handbooks for the trade schools (Osuch, Osuch, Kassenberg, 2003). It is, on the other hand, exceptional, to have a map of Euroregions for the entire Central Europe in a lyceum handbook (Mordawski, Wiecki, 2002). The lyceum handbooks

¹ It is not our purpose to present in detail the contents of all the handbooks, but rather to show the characteristic tendencies, which developed in the recent period. That is why we limit ourselves to the references to few, but typical instances.

explain the sense of the twinning and provide concrete examples (e.g. Makowska, ed., 2002 – of Częstochowa; Mordawski, Wiecki, 2002 – of Gdynia). The handbook edited by M. Makowska (2002) is characteristic in that it introduces “geographical workshops”, entitled “My locality (commune) co-operates with the world”, during which the young gather by themselves information on the examples of co-operation between their locality and abroad, and are obliged to propose its new forms (including the level of school). The scenario for these workshops was elaborated by F. Plit, and that is why they were introduced, as well, to the lyceum handbook for the broader course of geography (Plit, Osuch, Sielatycki, Wrona, 2003).

A typical approach consists in the consideration of the cross-border regional co-operation on the example of one, selected, well-functioning Euroregion. One can observe, though, a certain precaution as to the evaluation of effectiveness of functioning of the Euroregions located along the western, southern and eastern boundaries of Poland. The handbook edited by Makowska (2002) constitutes one of the few exceptions with this respect.

Second, a distinct change has taken place in the new (that is – published since 2001) handbooks of geography for gymnasium. It can be seen in these handbooks that the geographers abandon the state-centred way of thinking, that is – the perception, according to which the smallest unit considered is the state. The newest gymnasium handbooks introduce the notion of Euroregion and present the standard map of Euroregions along the boundaries of Poland. One of the pioneers of such an approach was M. Jędrusik with associates (Jędrusik, Jędrusik, Tomalkiewicz, 2001), who provided in their handbook an ample chapter entitled “How good to have a neighbour!”. The basic features of the geographical and social environment of the countries neighbouring upon Poland were given (such an approach was also encountered in some other handbooks), but, then, in the chapter entitled “Political, economic and military co-operation. What for?”, the map of Polish Euroregions was provided. It should be noted, though, that the courage of the authors virtually ended with the fact of publication of the figure mentioned. There was not enough room for explaining the notion of Euroregion. On the other hand, though, the existence and the functioning of the Vyšehrad Group were mentioned. Similar maps of Euroregions are published also in the other handbooks of, for instance, R. Domachowski, M. Wilczyńska-Wołoszyn (2001), W. Stankowski (2002), and M. Więkowski (2003).

This kind of approach appears to be appropriate, since a part of the young in Poland – luckily a small part – end their education already at the gymnasium level. At the same time, international co-operation realised at the level of regions, local societies, and even (or perhaps first of all) of individuals, is so important that teaching on it ought to encompass all the young people.

One should only regret that knowledge of international co-operation, especially in its social aspect, is transmitted solely during the lessons of geography and not during the lessons of knowledge of the society, that is – where, at least in view of the very name of the subject taught, one might expect a broader treatment of the problem. Yet, the program prerequisites of this subject for the general education at the basic level are very much Poland-centred. There is, of course, nothing wrong in the achievement of the educational objectives such as:

1. Development of the motivation and capacity for the individual and collective social activity on the grounds of the esteem for own country and law, and development of co-responsibility for the society and the state; ...

Why, however, the objectives do not include the formulations concerning the esteem for the others, also the neighbouring countries and their laws? Formation of such virtues would result not only in the enhancement of interest in the neighbouring societies, but, as well, in an easier resolution of the quite frequently arising conflicts. After all, is it geography or rather the knowledge of the society that should deal with the origins, consequences and the punishment for the Polish-Czechoslovak conflict about the land beyond the Olza river, or with the infamy of the Polish participation in the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968? But perhaps this should be the domain of history, though, apparently for lack of time, in many Polish schools nobody deals with the most recent history.

The already referred to program prerequisites contain, as a part of the subject matter to be taught at the basic level, the section on "Poland, Europe, world", composed of three points:

1. European integration; Poland in Europe.
2. International order – conflicts and safety systems.
3. Problems of the modern world.

Within very same section of the program prerequisites for this subject, taught according to a broader version, the following points are contained:

1. The uniting Europe – institutions, procedures, challenges.
2. Polish reason of state, foreign policy.
3. Social and economic inequalities in the contemporary world.
4. Globalisation – hopes and threats.

In both these cases the issues of cross-border co-operation might have found their place in the first two points. Such expectations, though, turn out to be excessive.

Relatively ample space had been devoted – along with many other questions – to the place of Poland in Europe in the handbook of K. Wojtaszczyk (1995, legal status as of 2001). The author presents in this handbook the changes of geopolitical position of Poland and mentions, in a very general way, the Central European Initiative and the CEFTA. A separate chapter is devoted to the bilateral relations of Poland with other countries, reference being made to the treaties on good neighbourhood and friendly co-operation with Germany, Lithuania and Ukraine. There is also a short characterisation of difficulties in the Polish-Russian contacts, but, surprisingly, the existence of the southern neighbours of Poland is forgotten, at least in the same chapter. The notion of Euroregion does not appear in this handbook, while the problem of international co-operation is reduced to the legal and political issues and theoretical considerations, without any references to the practice of co-operation! Yet, even such content constitutes a commendable example, since in the majority of handbooks even this information is lacking.

It sometimes happens, like in the case of I. Malinowska, D. Ura and U. Urban (2002), that the description of the place of Poland in Europe is limited to mentioning the integration of Poland with the European Union, and, just by name, the Vyšehrad Group, the Central European Initiative, and CEFTA. So much for the handbook of the

knowledge of the society at the basic level. A similar handbook (Smutek, Maleska, Surmacz, 2002) broadens the question of the “regional initiatives of international integration and co-operation” with the outline of history and structure of the Vysehrad Group and the Central European Initiative. No other examples of co-operation between Poland and its neighbours are provided. This broadening is, therefore, quite doubtful. It would anyway be interesting to know why numerous authors try to promote in the consciousness of the students the Central European Initiative, whose achievements in international co-operation are doubtful, and the very organisation is in principle not functioning?

What conclusions can be drawn from these considerations? The development of foundations for the effective cross-border co-operation and for the Euroregions that will function well in the future should be started with creation in the minds of the school young of the consciousness as to the essence and need of such collaboration. Until now, this process – at least in the Polish schools – is taking place with definite difficulties. It appears, as well, that – out of necessity – it is the geographers that should take on the duty of bringing this consciousness to the young. The beginnings have already been done. It would be interesting to know how similar problems are being treated within the educational systems of the countries bordering with Poland, including Czechia. This, however, is the place for the analysis to be carried out by the others.

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