Elisabeth Erdmann, Wolfgang Hasberg

History Teacher Education

Global Interrelations
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History Didactics in the Slovak Republic

Viliam Kratochvíl and Barnabás Vajda

1. How significant/important is history in the Slovak society?

In Slovakia, historical culture as a specific complex of historical thinking (comprised of all sorts of historical information, ranging from scientific to non-scientific) is still influenced by the transformation process started by the change of the political regime in 1989, and the establishment of the independent Slovak Republic in 1993. These key events have left an enormous impression on the political, economic and social situation which still reflects an ongoing struggle about the past. Jacques Rupnik, a French political scientist, calls this a „search for employable past“, and this rule seems to be continuously working within the Slovak society. Though the importance of the nation’s historical past has slightly declined in the eyes of the wider public in the last few years, it is also true that its intensity greatly depends on the character of the political agenda of the actual governments.

A bit surprisingly, and a little bit in a contrary with usual political patterns in Europe, it seems that Slovak leftist political formations or coalitions tend to be more focused on the importance of the nations‘ history than the centrum or right wing ones. In some cases, it is quite clear which political side favours which historical event. E.g. strong refusal towards the Communist totalitarianism has been typical for the representatives of the political right side; on the other hand, the problem of the most ancient history of the „Old Slovaks“ was picked up by the social democrats and the nationalists. In most cases, a particular historical event runs indistinguishably across the whole political spectre, and consequently through the public discourse, such as the history of the Slovak State (1939-1945) and its leader, Josef Tiso, or the Slovak national uprising in 1944, or the historical personality of Gustav Husák, the native Slovak president of the post-1968 Communist Czechoslovakia. In Slovakia, a country which had shared a mutual past with the Hungarian Kingdom for many centuries until 1918, and where some 10% of the population still consists of ethnic Hungarians, the misuse of history for political purposes is not an exclusive domain for Slovak politicians, for the representatives of the Hungarian political parties have used and misused it, too.

Evidently, there are many public efforts to convert history into a practical political instrument on all sides of the Slovak political spectrum. History as an argument in the political and/or public discourse is less attractive in Slovakia today than it used to be for instance some twenty years ago. Arbitrary misuse of history however is still an important phenomenon in the armoury of any Slovakian politician. This is one of the major reasons why we think that in Slovakia we would need a more determined presence of skilled history didacticians, experts who could professionnally deal with any public use or misuse of history.
Authors

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Selected Publications:

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2. What is the position of the history education in the Slovakian school education?

In Slovakia, compulsory school education lasts for ten years. According to the last education reform act (from 2008), all primary schools, gymnasiums and secondary vocational schools have to adjust their education programmes to the National Education Programme (NEP), formulated by the Slovak National Institute for Education (Štátny pedagogický ústav). As far as history is concerned within the NEP, at the second level of primary schools (grades 5-9), history is contained in an educational field called People & Society. In the 4-year gymnasiums, history is a compulsory subject in grades 1-3, plus students may enrol for an optional history seminar in grades 3 and 4. In accordance with the majority of the European school systems, history is an optional subject for the school leaving examination, called maturita (abitur) in Slovakia. The steady but continuous reduction in the number of weekly lessons devoted to history is a significant sign of the fact that school policy of the modern Slovakia prefers languages and natural sciences over history. In 1990, on the secondary level (grades 5-9) there used to be 2 lessons per week in each grade. In 2013, there are by 4 lessons less, being only 1 lesson per week in grades 5-8, and 2 lessons per week in grade 9, where modern and contemporary history is taught.

Along with these, there are two more problems which can hardly be handled by traditional history teaching approaches. The first is the teachers’ general need for content reduction. If the state has reduced the number of history lessons, they argue, there is no other option than to reduce the content what should be compulsory taught, too. The second major problem is parents’ negative attitude toward history as a school subject. What do we gain from history teaching?, many parents ask headmasters or class teachers. Or even if they do not ask this question publicly, in the eyes of the general public there are much more „important“ subjects than history, such as English language or Maths, subjects and skills that most parents regard as more useful for their children’s future. Both above mentioned professional challenges can only be dealt with using modern history didactics. It is a good news for many that the process of a general review of the National Education Programme from history in order to significantly reduce the content of the history curricula has been done since late 2012. At the end of this procedure (sometimes late 2013), the experts of the Slovak National Institute for Education responsible for the history curricula expect that both elementary and secondary schools will have less compulsory (prescribed) history content, and by using more developed methods and tools, they will be able to devote more professional attention to a thinner content. Also (as to the second problem) it is history didacticians (and not regular history teachers), properly equipped with professional arguments, who can bravely face the public, and who can sufficiently explain the importance of history education.
3. What is the position of the history and the history didactics in the structure of the Slovak university education?

The change of the political system after 1989 was a turning point for the Slovak historiography. Its importance rests on the fact that the historians realised they got an opportunity to gradually take over the organisation of history as a scientific discipline by themselves. Now it is possible to conclude that history at universities has preserved its position as an independent scientific discipline formulating its own themes, methodology and forms of both history teaching and research. Since 1989, the inflow of students interested in studying history has been constantly rising. Nevertheless, it seems to have attained its culmination point now, whereas the number of pre-service history teachers in a two-branch study (i.e. history plus some other subject) are constantly on decline.

In order to survey the overall position and the precise content of the history didactics in the university courses of the Slovak Republic, the following questions need to be analysed: Is history didactics as such present in the study programmes of the history departments at the Slovakian universities? If yes, at what level of the courses is history didactics taught? Has history didactics established itself in the pre-service history teacher training, or is it an occasional and negligible school subject? What exactly is the content of the history didactics courses, and what is their relation with the methodology of history teaching? To what extent does it consist of theoretical and/or practical courses? What is the place of the history didactics in the examinations, especially in the state exams which confirm graduation at the end of the Slovakian university studies?

While answering these questions, we have used the following research methods for this paper. Beyond the very thin literature on this topic, first and foremost we surveyed the study programmes and recommended syllabuses which can be found on the websites of the universities. Even if these online platforms have certain limitations (mainly they are not always detailed and fresh enough), they provide basic source of information on study programmes, students’ profiles, teachers’ requirements, lists of thesis, publications, annual reports, etc. Further on, in some cases we were able to

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obtain some first-hand information from respected colleagues who run history didactics courses at the teacher training faculties. In some other cases, we collected some informal data from graduates who attended history didactics courses.

Study of history as an academic discipline and the two-branch study designed for pre-service teachers organised as a three-year study leading to Bachelor’s degree and a two-year study oriented towards Master’s degree is provided by eight universities in their faculties of arts or in faculties of education (see their list below). However, prior to any further and deeper analysis we have to conclude two facts which express the exasperating situation of history didactics as science at the university departments in Slovakia. The first is that there is not a single department of history didactics which would function independently along the other well established history chairs, such as departments of national history or departments of world history. And secondly, even if there are some genuine efforts aiming at creation of a decent history didactics chair, we suffer of a lack of basic literature on history didactics in Slovak language. The very last university coursebook specifically on history didactics had been written by prof. Július Alberty back in 1992. Since then, Viliam Kratochvíl has written a series of detailed studies on it, and Barnabás Vajda produced an Introduction to Didactics and Methodology of Teaching History in Hungarian language.3

4. Is history didactics present in the study programmes offered by the history departments of the Slovakian universities?

It is a fact that history didactics is present in the study programmes offered by the history departments of the Slovakian universities. But the proper answer is more complex than that. By mid-2012, there are altogether 35 institutions of higher education in the Slovak Republic (a country of 5.3 million inhabitants) offering an opportunity of studying at university level. From these, 23 universities are state universities (including three ones run by the state armed forces and state police), and the rest 12 are private ones. Out of the 23 state universities, there are 8 universities where there is a faculty with at least one history departments in general, and where some kind of history teacher training takes place in particular. These 8 history faculties/departments do offer some courses for future history teachers. This means that in 2012, some 22% of all Slovakian universities (8 out of 35) possess a state-accredited study programme officially called „Teaching Academic Subjects, Study Programme History“4.

The list of the 8 Slovakian universities, their faculties, and their departments which have been subject of our analysis is this:

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3 Julius Alberty: Didaktika dejepisu (Banská: Bystrica 1992). S. publications of Viliam Kratochvíl and Barnabás Vajda in the authors entry at the end of the book.
4 Študijný odbor 1.1.1 učiteľstvo akademických predmetov v kombinácii, študijný program história, in Slovak.
The name and the seat city of the university | The name of its faculty where history is taught | Department where history didactics is taught
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Univerzita Komenského, Bratislava | Filozofická fakulta | Katedra všeobecných dejín
Univerzita Komenského, Bratislava | Pedagogická fakulta | Katedra histórie
Univerzita J. Selyeho, Komárno | Pedagogická fakulta | Katedra histórie
Univerzita Sv. Cyrila a Metoda, Trnava | Filozofická fakulta | Katedra histórie
Univerzita Konštanínfa Filozofa, Nitra | Filozofická fakulta | Katedra histórie
Univerzita Mateja Bela, Banská Bystrica | Fakulta humanitných vied | Katedra histórie
Prešovská Univerzita, Prešov | Filozofická fakulta | Inštitút histórie
Univerzita P. J. Šafárika, Košice | Filozofická fakulta | Katedra histórie

It is worth noting that all history departments on the list are exclusively situated at state universities, and none of them is part of a private higher education institution. We can conclude that at least at five departments out of eight, there is at least some history didactics included in the courses, and this is slightly more than half of the all history departments in Slovakia. What makes the proper survey difficult is that among the undergraduate courses there are three school subjects which are (at least for the superficial spectator) identical, namely the *Methodology of History Teaching*, the *General Didactics*, and the *History Didactics*. These three can sometimes hardly be separated from each other, neither by name nor by content. In any case, minimally five history departments in Slovakia, namely the University Komenského Filozofická fakulta, the University Komenského Pedagogická fakulta, the University J. Selye Pedagogická fakulta, the University Mateja Bela Fakulta humanitných vied, and the University of Konštanínfa Filozofa Filozofická fakulta *do have* courses that are literally called as ‘history didactics’.

The situation at the further three university departments is as follows. At the University of P. J. Šafárik Filozofická fakulta there is *not yet* history didactics taught. It means that this history department was established in 2009 only, which means that at the time of this article (mid-2012) the department has students on Bachelor’s level only. Nevertheless, they do have a subject such as history didactics in their curriculum which will be soon taught at the Master’s level. At the Prešovská Univerzita Filozofická fakulta Inštitút histórie, there is a subject called ‘History didactics’ which is inc-

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5 We are grateful for this information to Dr. Slávka Otčenášová from Košice.
cluded in the *general paedagogical course*. And finally, the University of Santa Cyril and Metod is an institution where its core syllabus does not offer any subject called 'history didactics'. It offers 'Basis of pedagogy' and 'General didactics' on the Bachelor’s level of its studies\(^6\), and 'General Didactics' is also included in the general paedagogical state exams, but eventually we have a good reason to think that the content of these courses is not history didactics.

5. **At what level of university courses is history didactics taught in Slovakia?**

Since 2008, the so called Bologna System is operating at the Slovakian universities, which means that pre-service university teacher training courses consist of a 3-year-long Bachelor’s level (Bc) plus a 2-year-long Master's (Mgr) level.

The majority of the history departments do *not* have any didactical courses on their Bc level of studies at all. They start offering history didactics on Mgr level of their studies, like the University Komenského Filozofická fakulta, the University Komenského Pedagogická fakulta, and the University Sv. Cyrila a Metoda Filozofická fakulta.

Two departments (the University J. Selye Pedagogická fakulta, and the University Komenského Pedagogická fakulta) offer both Methodology of History Teaching and History Didactics. In both cases, these two courses are separated from each other as far as the level of studies is concerned. It means that the history department at the University of J. Selye Pedagogická fakulta runs its methodology courses on Bc level, during the 2nd year of the three-year-long Bc study. History didactics is included in the Mgr level of studies, either during the first year (the University J. Selye Pedagogická fakulta) or in the 2nd year of the two-year-long Mgr studies like at the University of Komenského Pedagogická fakulta.

In some cases history didactics is taught in one semester (e.g. at the University J. Selye Pedagogická fakulta). Nevertheless, it is more typical that history didactics courses are divided into two parts, History Didactics part I. and part II. For instance, at the University Komenského Pedagogická fakulta there is 'Didaktika dejepisu' I. and II. plus 'Seminár k didaktike' I. and II. This is also the case at further history departments like at the University Komenského Filozofická fakulta, the University Komenského Pedagogická fakulta, and the University Mateja Bela Fakulta humanitných vied.

Since under the Slovakian law a university semesters *has to be* minimally 13 weeks long, and since most courses of history didactics are given a time-span of two lessons per week, in very practical terms this means that in optimum case Slovakian undergraduates can have 52 history didactics lessons (i.e. 52 times 45 minutes) in total. This is the case at least at the half of the existing history departments in Slovakia.

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\(^6\) Základy pedagogiky and Všeobecná didaktika, in Slovak.
6. **To what extent does history didactics consist of theoretical and/or practical courses?**

As to the form of the courses, in most cases history didactics courses consist of a combination of lectures and seminars, like at the University Sv. Cyrila a Metoda, the University Konštantíná Filozofa Filozofická fakulta, the University Mateja Bela Fakulta humanitných vied, and (according to its planned curriculum) the University P. J. Šafárika Filozofická fakulta. At these departments, in the overwhelming majority of cases there is one lecture plus two seminars per week, while the latter one is explicitly based on undergraduates’ personal involvement and activity.

In some cases arrangements are slightly different. E.g. at the University Komenského Pedagogická fakulta there are two lectures plus two seminars. At the University Komenského Filozofická fakulta on the Master’s level there are no didactics lectures at all; instead history didactics lessons entirely consist of several kinds of activities, such as deep analysis or deconstruction or construction of lesson plans, or analysis of textbooks, or practicing several kinds of source-based activities, etc. In the case of the University J. Selye Pedagogická fakulta, there is an additional subject added to the history didactics, called Seminar of Practical Teaching. 7

The question of history didactics and methodology is also linked with the pre-service teaching training, called 'pedagogická prax‘ in Slovakia. Practical teaching training means shorter or longer periods of time spent in real teaching situations in real school environment. The time spent directly at elementary or secondary schools can vary from a couple of days to 2 or 3 weeks, depending on the demands of the university or the department. On the undergraduates’ side, it might include passive observation of history lessons as well as full-scale teaching of a lesson or even of a series of lessons. During the time of this very practical teacher training, undergraduates are under a joint supervision of the local teacher as well as of the senior lecturer from his/her university. The history departments included in our survey all require and provide practical teacher training in various forms and time spans, ranging from 2 to 15 lessons per semester.

7. **What is the place of the history didactics in the courses and the examinations, especially in the state exams?**

According to the available syllabuses, history didactics courses are compulsory, and this fact refers to its importance within the core syllabus. It is also typical that undergraduates have to take an exam from this subject on two different levels. Firstly, students have to successfully complete history didactics as an individual subject which is part of the semestral course. Secondly, some departments include questions from history didactics into their final exams, called state exams where at the very end of the studies undergraduates have to certify their knowledge in front of a panel in an oral test. If the ’importance‘ of the undergraduate courses can be measured in the  

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7 Seminár praktického vyučovania, in Slovak.
number of credits that undergraduates receive for them when successfully completing a certain course, history didactics courses make up some 20-25% in average of all credits that can be obtained throughout a 2-year-long Master's course. In general, the departments in our survey offer some 6 to 12 credits out of 30 to 35 credits in total for the Master’s level, as it is the case at the University J. Selye Pedagogická fakulta (8 out of 32) or the University Komenského Pedagogická fakulta (12 out of 32 credits on the Master’s level).

Though only one university has made the list of its state exam questions public (namely the University of P. J. Šafárik Filozofická fakulta), it is right to say that at least four out of eight Slovakian history departments do include history didactics topics into their final oral exams, such as the University Komenského Filozofická fakulta, the University Komenského Pedagogická fakulta, the University J. Selye Pedagogická fakulta, and the University Mateja Bela Fakulta humanitných vied. Among these we can find the following questions: ‘Differences between historical skills and knowledge’; ‘Operationalisation and taxonomisation’; ‘Typology of history textbooks’; ‘Using primary sources in history teaching’, etc.

8. What is the content of the history didactics which is established in the undergraduate courses of the Slovakian university programmes?

Before and during our research, we were forced to specify what should we regard as true or real history didactics content in the courses, and how can one separate it from ‘classical’ didactics or methodology of history teaching. We have regarded definitions by well known historians or didacticians like Joachim Rohlfes, Jörn Rüsen, Hans-Jürgen Pandel, Bodo von Borries, Elisabeth Erdmann, Robert Maier, Susanne Popp and others.8 Besides this we also considered other conceptual definitions by several Eastern European historians and didacticians like Zdeněk Beneš and Blažena Gracová (from the Czech Republic) or Ágnes Fischer Dárdai and József Kaposi (from Hungary) or Viliam Kratochvíl (from Slovakia) who all formulated several definitions relevant for the geographical context of Eastern Europe where history didactics is not very wide spread.9 All these experts who have had their history didactics schools on their own

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and by Western European standards, acknowledge the fact that history didactics as such started to spread in Eastern Europe only after the political changes of 1989, so today the history didactical approach is neither a very old nor a sufficiently developed scientific branch in Eastern Europe. When referring to the exasperating situation of history didactics in Slovakia and the Czech Republic, Zdeněk Beneš informally calls our university courses as 'made according to a cookery-book'. Thus he refers to their mixed character where history didactics is mistakenly understood as a step-by-step 'cook-book', and where confusing elements of methodology are mixed with true history didactics heard and seen perhaps at international conferences or seminars. This conceptual shade as well as the uncertain place of the history didactics between the historical and pedagogical science, is rather obvious from the research we have done. Taking into consideration the above mentioned factors, during our research we generously regard as history didactics any content that referred to the didactical approach. For instance, we have regarded as history didactics any voluntary seminars focusing on the theory and technique of history syllabus designing, or any seminar on history textbook research, because these are typical topics and reflect the high professional consciousness that the history didactical approach requires. We were also keen to accept as history didactics all specialised university courses like 'Historical sources in school history teaching' (University Komenského Filozofická fakulta) or 'History textbook as a source of plurality methods for both the teacher and pupil' (University Komenského Filozofická fakulta) or 'History schoolbook research' (University P. J. Šafárika Filozofická fakulta and also at the University J. Selye Pedagogická fakulta), etc. which with very high probability contribute to a higher level of didactical approach.

On the other hand, we decided not to include into our research courses which according to our best knowledge are typical methodological themes, even if they are labelled as 'history didactics'. We acted so especially when the specification of the course content was not possible form the course description. For example, 'Multimedia in history teaching' (University Sv. Cyrila a Metoda Filozofická fakulta) or 'Modern trends in history teaching' (University Mateja Bela Fakulta humanitných vied) or 'Museum pedagogics' (University Mateja Bela Fakulta humanitných vied) or 'Organisation forms of history teaching' (Prešovská Univerzita Filozofická fakulta) or 'History in mass media' (University Konštantina Filozofá Filozofická fakulta) or 'Teaching history in the 21st century' (University Komenského Pedagogická fakulta) or 'Protection of memorials and cultural heritage' (University Komenského Pedagogická fakulta) etc. These courses, judged according to their not very detailed description, in our understanding do not necessary correspond with the current history didac-
tical approach. Alike, ICT based courses (e.g., *IT as teaching tool in history teaching* [Prešovská Univerzita Filozofická fakulta]) belong to methodology of history teaching, too.

Considering the range of optional seminars, facultative or specialised courses offered by the history departments in our survey, it is minimally debatable and it is sometimes not easy to make a fair judgement whether these courses are indeed part of the history didactics courses or they rather belong to the methodology of history teaching. In any case, these optional seminars are usually part of the undergraduates’ Master’s courses.

To the balanced judgement on the position and quality of the history didactics, we have to point out to at least one more important fact. Beside their history teacher programmes, nearly all history departments in Slovakia (with the exception of the the University J. Selye Pedagogická fakulta) offer pure scientific history courses too, i.e. courses with no focus on teaching history as school subject. One of the reasons doing so is that the labour market for history teachers is much bigger than the one for research based academic historians. It is important to point out to this because this fact has an impact on the quality of pre-service history teacher programmes, since it means that in a country like Slovakia where state universities are by large financed according to the number of their enrolled students, only some universities can afford not to open courses for history teachers. In other words, some history departments run pre-service teacher training courses only from financial necessity.

8. If the position of the Slovakian history didactics is as fragile as described above, what does its position depend on?

As we have seen above, the number of history didactics lessons is rather high at the most Slovakian history departments. In fact, some 52 contact lessons in all is quite an amazing period of time in a country where the number of contact lessons at universities is legally limited to some 40 lessons per week. And yet, it is a paradox that on the other hand the real content of these ‘didactics’ courses does not really correspond with the most up-to-date trends and approaches of the international history didactics.

We have to mention that the range and content of the history didactics courses to a great extent depend on the professional orientation and specialisation of individual historians teaching history didactics. It is the personal composition of the teacher staff, and certainly their networks especially as far as their cooperation in international projects is concerned. Here a sad fact of painfully missing or minimally very limited language skills has to be mentioned. Thirdly, the foreign relations of the history

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10 In Slovak, *Učiteľstvo akademických predmetov versus História jednoodborové štúdium*.

11 At most departments there are 2+1 history didactics lessons per week, so there are 3 lessons throughout a 13-week-long semester, and in most cases departments have history didactics in 2 semesters, (3 x 13) x 2 = 52 contact lessons.

12 Kratochvil, “History Teaching in the Slovak Republic” (note 1), 199.
didactics university staff is on a quite low level, e.g. if we consider their joint projects with leading scientific centres like the International Society for History Didactics, or the Georg Eckert Institute in Braunschweig, or the Euroclio, the largest and most influential international history teacher federation.

The un-established position of history didactics in Slovakia (comparable to the one in the Czech Republic\(^{13}\)) is even more transparent if we cast a glance at those components that are indirectly linked with the pre-service teacher training. If we look at the list of the themes that are offered to undergraduates to write a thesis on, or we look at the list of books written on this topic, or if we try to find at least some publications in the periodicals of the faculties – all in these cases we can do nothing else just to conclude the sadly remarkable lack of history didactical themes. The same is true for the state-sponsored scientific projects (called in Slovakia VEGA, KEGA) where in the last five years we could scarcely find any successful project aimed at either general or particular development of history didactics.\(^{14}\)

9. Conclusions

We can conclude that all history departments in Slovakia do run study programmes on theoretical and practical knowledge and skills on pre-service history teaching. We can also conclude that either explicitly or overtly, ‘history didactics’ is present in the study programmes of the half of the Slovakian history departments. Nevertheless, it can be stated that even if Slovakian history departments use the explicit course title ‘history didactics’, it is often clear from the more detailed description that it is history didactics only in wording but not in content. Most course contents correspond more with methodology of history teaching rather than with genuine history didactical approach. Under scrutiny it is obvious that some half of the courses in our research are genuine history didactics, and that as far as the real content of the eight history didactics courses at the mentioned eight universities is concerned, most of them are in fact methodology of history teaching, or at minimum are closer to methodology rather than to history didactics.

When doing a deeper analysis into the causes of such a not too favourable situation, we can conclude that one of the most obvious reason is the tension between the established historiography as a renowned science and history didactics as a university discipline which is regarded by most professional historians as an inferior field mostly because of its paedagogical content. The level of the low acceptance of school history teaching methodology as well as history didactics by professional historians is evident for example from the latter’s relation to the design and production of history schoolbooks. Despite the fact that historiography gets transformed into a subject mat-


\(^{14}\) We found only one public lecture specifically on history didactics, at the University Mateja Bela Fakulta humanitných vied dated to year 2006 by Prof. Dr. Hab. Adam Suchonski. http://www2.fhv.umb.sk/Katedry/Katedra%20historie/ (accessed: June 30\(^{th}\), 2012).
ter by means of schoolbooks, many historians show a kind of disrespect and a constant inclination to assess them as a lower genre of historical literature, or a text which is not part of a serious scientific discipline. Besides other factors, this sceptical view stems from the conceptual framework of Slovak historiography, more specifically from a narrow understanding of historiography.

What gives us some hope regarding the future of history didactics in Slovakia is that it is rather clear now what should be done. For example, Viliam Kratochvíl has recently worked out the ’metaphor of a tree‘ which is a very clear and practical indication how modern history didactics should be taught at the Slovakian universities.15

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If there is no special note all websites quoted in this article were last accessed on: XXXXXXXX.