

# Navigating Social Worlds in Central and East European context

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**Abstract.** Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) occupies an ambiguous position in Europe. While many CEE countries had long joined the European Union, yet they are unceasingly perceived as lagging behind in terms of their democratic culture and liberal principles. In a sense, CEE has been in a permanent state of transition for over three decades, trying to “catch up” with the more advanced West. One area where this process manifests is education—a sector that has undergone significant changes in the recent decades, yet has not achieved the expected results. More specifically, this study analyses how two aspects of Western education system—multicultural education and the promotion of critical thinking skills—can be incorporated into the CEE education systems through the examples of Poland and Hungary, highlighting the importance of overcoming the historically deep-seated culture of frontal education style, as well as historical, political and social legacies of the past.

**Research Contribution:** This research shows that implementation of educational policies that are rooted in Western educational traditions must accommodate the political, cultural and social context of the CEE region for successful implementation.

**Keywords:** *culture of education, Central and Eastern Europe, frontal education, politicization of education*

## 1. Introduction

Socio-historical legacies as well as contemporary political, cultural and economic characteristics play a powerful role in shaping educational culture. In analysing educational policies of countries in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), some shared experiences must be acknowledged, “such as their historical experience with the authoritarian–socialist or communist rule and its impact on education policies, as well as their long-lasting economic semi-peripherality” [14]. These common political and economic legacies also imply a particular relationship with Western Europe and broadly speaking with “the West,” which must be addressed to fully understand how

educational culture developed since regime change, and why CEE education is still described as lagging behind its Western counterparts. Undoubtedly, Western standards became “benchmarks” used in international reports and studies on education, such as in a recent joint publication between the UNICEF and OECD:

“A knowledgeable and skilled population is a critical component to the vibrant economies and inclusive, cohesive societies that EECA [Eastern European and Central Asian] countries aim to build, which makes education reform a central pillar of development efforts. To reform education, EECA countries need to understand the performance of their education systems and benchmark their outcomes against those of other countries” [10].

Here, “other countries” imply the more developed Western countries; consequently, numerous studies and manuals have not only demonstrated how these Western educational systems function, but also what approaches need to be adapted in order to build similar systems of education elsewhere. In other words, there is an assumption that education systems in developing regions should resemble those of the West, and any discrepancy should be addressed and studied. In the recent years, there has been a growing criticism of “exporting” Western educational or pedagogical systems and adopting them in less developed countries:

“Western education systems in particular have been praised for being the cornerstone of rapid modernisation in developed countries including Australia and the United States. Therefore, Western education systems have been increasingly introduced across developing countries to spark meaningful development and accelerate the velocity of economic growth. However, what these education systems fail to address is the vast differences in culture, tradition and lifestyle that exist between developing nations and the Western world” [19].

Nevertheless, countries of CEE have joined various frameworks to help them “catch up,” of which one example was the Bologna process, aimed at standardising and unifying the European university systems, and allowing Eastern European countries to reform their communist-era universities and join the (Western) European educational arenas; yet, observers began asking why, despite such high ambitions, CEE education still faces many challenges [24]. Particular areas of challenge that tend to be highlighted are multicultural education and critical thinking.

## **2. Method**

To address the puzzle described above, we proceed with a brief discussion of how historical legacies, social diversity, and other factors form the foundation of the culture of education in the CEE region, which is markedly different from that of Western Europe. This section relies on extensive literature review and desk research. The study heavily builds on the experience and knowledge gathered from two Erasmus+ projects: Tackling Sensitive Topics in a classroom (2019-KA203-05, hereafter Sensi Class), led by Tartu University, and Navigating Social Worlds: Toolbox for Social Inquiry (2020-1-PL01-KA226-096356 hereafter Social Worlds), led by SGH Warsaw School of Economics. Both authors participated in these projects.

After considering the historical experiences and the particular cultural, political and economic contexts of the CEE region, this paper proceeds to unpack the challenges related to education with a focus on multicultural education and diversity, highlighting the importance of local context in understanding the current values and dynamics of educational culture. To that end, the paper presents the findings of two case studies, one conducted within the Sensi Class project, involving a regional survey and semi-structured interviews with teachers, and one within the Social Worlds project, involving a cross-sectional survey of students.

With that, our methodology combines extensive desk research, including less accessible literature in local languages, as well as case studies developed within the framework of the above-mentioned projects. This approach allowed us to combine theoretical knowledge and embed it into local context.

## **3. Findings and Discussion: Historical legacies and social diversity**

Due to multiple historical reasons, ethnic composition of CEE countries greatly differs from that of Western Europe: while Western European countries assertively participated in colonialism, Eastern European societies were preoccupied with various internal conflicts and engaged in struggles for independence. Scholars of Western Europe’s global conquest for example point out that “from 1492 to 1914, Europeans conquered or colonized more than 80 percent of the entire world” even though “Europe represents only about 8% of the planet’s landmass” [36]. The legacies of colonialism had significant effects on ethnic diversity in these countries, as many of the immigrant communities in Western Europe indeed originated in the former colonies [2], while colonisation possibly provided European countries with a greater experience with foreign populations over time as well [29].

In the meantime, nations of CEE were affected by numerous major geopolitical transformations and experienced various arrangements of power relations, which influenced their historical ties to one another. For

instance, Poland had lost its independence, and the Polish state virtually ceased to exist from 1795 until the end of World War I (WWI) in 1918, while Austro-Hungarian empire was one of the conquerors of the Polish territory. Meanwhile, Hungary was part of the Habsburg Monarchy and then Austro-Hungary between until 1918, and after WWI lost two thirds of its territory under the Treaty of Trianon (1920), leading to still lasting tensions with its neighbouring countries. After World War II, both countries were members of the Warsaw Pact until its dissolution in 1989. At this time, political, economic and cultural life was organised according to state-socialist and centralised logic, often under the control of the Soviet Union.

The complex history of CEE has left a mark on ethnic structure of local populations and extent of multiculturalism in the society. Centuries of conflicts, struggles and disputes led to border changes and resulted in autochthonous ethnic minorities inhabiting CEE countries and waves of migration. For instance, due to the above-mentioned partition of Hungary, there are significant Hungarian minorities living in Romania and Slovakia. Many Poles have migrated to the United States when Poland lost its independence in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, and there are also significant Polish minorities in Lithuania, Belarus and Ukraine. The collective memory of the past has made some forms of coexistence easy, while others more challenging, leading to “memory wars,” affecting for example Russians living in Poland, or Poles living in Lithuania [1].

Today, in terms of diversity, CEE societies, and especially Hungary and Poland, tend to be relatively monoethnic [12], as the table below indicates, while the level of xenophobia is high [11]. Among the most “visible” minorities in the CEE region are the Roma, who constitute one of the most numerous minority groups; in fact, in Hungary Roma are the biggest ethnic group. Non-European ethnic groups are few and negligible in number, as a result of relatively marginal migration from non-European countries to the CEE region. Historically CEE lacks colonial links to Africa or Asia; while during socialism the former Warsaw-pact countries maintained some relations with countries that were sympathetic towards socialism such as Egypt, Iraq or Syria, yet these ties did not significantly change the ethnic composition of CEE countries. After regime change, CEE remained unattractive for economic or political migrants from outside of Europe, who tended to migrate to more developed countries of Western Europe. Moreover, there was a social stigma as well, since immigrants from Asia and Africa in CEE were often considered “exotic” due to their small number and unfamiliarity of cultural diversity by mainstream societies [28].

**Table 1.** Non-national population in selected CEE countries (2019)

	Total ('000)	% of the population	Citizens of ('000)
Czech Republic	557,5	5,2	Ukraine – 129,3; Slovakia – 116,9; Vietnam* – 60,9; Russia – 36,1; Poland – 21,3
Hungary	180.5	1,8	Ukraine – 24,2; Romania – 21,0; China* – 18,9; Germany – 16,5%; Slovakia – 9,6
Poland	289.8	0,8	Ukraine – 214,7; Belarus – 25,5; Germany – 21,3; Russia – 12,5; Vietnam – 12,0
Slovakia	76,1	1,4	Czechia – 14,0; Hungary – 10,7; Romania – 6,9%; Poland – 5,9; Germany – 4.2

\* Population of non-European origin; Source: [23]

Despite joining the European Union in 2004, the so-called ‘New Member States’ of CEE had a number of tasks to fulfil to catch up with the Western part of the continent, and embrace European values and a cultural transformation was one of the milestones to be achieved. Increasingly, there were distinctions made between CEE compared to the Western Europe – a tradition that in fact goes back as early as the beginning of 18<sup>th</sup> century – with Western Europe was considered to be progressive and Eastern Europe was backwards [40]. Moreover, the “perceptions of growing estrangement” between Western and Eastern European countries seems to lead to disappointments and regional polarisation [20]. There is a common frustration in the CEE region, and most vocally in Hungary and Poland, that the West is attempting to impose its value system. This tension is evident in the realm of education as well.

#### 4. Culture of education: Multicultural education and critical thinking

While multicultural education has been promoted in Western Europe and echoed in various EU-level documents [33], monoethnic societies in CEE have been more concerned to preserve their national values – an agenda that has dominated public education policy in countries like Hungary, where schooling is seen as a tool to carry on

certain political principles, even if they contradict EU values. For example, Rózsa Hoffmann when serving as a Secretary of State for Education of the Ministry of National Resources (2010–2013) revealingly stated that “it is important that the minds of students living within political limits of Hungary be rectified, and the knowledge corrected that is confused or lacking,” a goal that was carried on by Miklós Kásler, Minister of Human Resources (2018–2022), who highlighted for whom it was a mission “to make the youngster’s national identity and [national] memory healthy,” and contribute to an “intellectually and culturally healthy Hungarian nation that knows its past . . . and wants to persist” [8].

Indeed, multicultural education has a long history in Western multicultural societies, while it emerged relatively recently in the CEE region, where it has still not been rooted. Multicultural education has a long history in the United States since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, and was later adopted in Western Europe as well. It served a purpose of “address[ing] such issues as racial and social class segregation, the disproportionate achievement of students of various backgrounds, and the structural inequality in both schools and society,” primarily relevant for diverse Western societies that needed to manage diversity, especially with significant waves of immigration in the past and growing social multiculturalism [26]. Thus, multicultural education has been developed and implemented in the context of West European multicultural societies [13].

In CEE countries, and most explicitly in Poland and Hungary, not only multiculturalism is rejected, but increasingly a primordial understanding of the nation is promoted, with given values and principles. In Hungary, for example, the most recent speech of PM Viktor Orbán has sparked an international outrage, suggesting that societies where races mingle are “no longer nations,” highlighting that “we [Hungarians] are not a mixed race . . . and we do not want to become a mixed race” [39]. In Poland, “the current Polish government uses such a sense of Polishness as an argument for the preservation of race and nation,” in which “Catholicism, Conservatism and Polishness are inseparable” [3]. At the same time, in both countries, education has been significant politicised and mobilised in the interest of the state, reflecting conservative political and increasingly promoting religious values of the countries [8] [18] [6].

With opposing approaches to multicultural education in Western and Eastern Europe, it raises the following question: if “in many countries around the world multicultural education is the leading strategy for the development of a multicultural society” [37], then how should multicultural education be applied in countries that actively oppose multiculturalism? In part, this question, or more broadly how some aspects of Western education system, such as multicultural education and critical thinking can be applied and incorporated into the CEE education systems, motivated two of the earlier mentioned Erasmus+ projects, which are described in more detail below.

#### *4.1 Diversity and inclusion in the classrooms of CEE*

Discussion about diversity and multiculturalism in education has not reached the post socialist countries of Eastern Europe until the 1990s [34], and after that, various educational programs were developed to teach about diversity, mostly understood as teaching about other cultures [35]. When multicultural education finally paved its way to CEE, it was in part a vital strategy designed by the European Union to integrate diverse groups in European societies [30], yet it soon became an educational and institutional challenge for largely monocultural post-socialist societies of CEE to implement the strategy in practice [27]. One of the most significant challenges was that teachers’ perception of diversity within classrooms is still rooted in historical legacies: under nearly five decades of socialism, social diversity was largely seen as a class-based and economically-defined phenomenon, and this view dominates until today [4]. Another challenge was to teach about other cultures without the presence of these cultures in the society [15]. The realisation of diversity education then became a litmus test for CEE countries to embrace European values and principles. As a result, CEE countries participated in a number of EU initiatives aimed at intercultural dialogue and education, such as the Year of Intercultural Dialogue by the EU (2008), with intercultural exchange programs (e.g. within the Youth in Action Programme or Erasmus) often serving as the first opportunity to get to know people from the other side of the Mediterranean, or to grasp ethnic diversity of West European countries.

In the early phase of intercultural education in the monocultural context of CEE, schools turned to the practice of cultural appropriation as well as presenting stereotypical knowledge and folklore. Many teachers did not have educational materials, knowledge, or skills to adequately teach about other cultures, which was addressed through the successive effort of designing educational materials aimed at delivering factual information about cultures, rather than building intercultural awareness [35] or intercultural competencies [17]. While this approach complemented the knowledge-oriented teaching style dominant in CEE schools, it also strengthened stereotypes about other cultures by advocating cultural determinism, which in turn produced a form of neo-Orientalism [39].

To understand how diversity is conceptualized by educators of the CEE region, one partner institution (Central European University) conducted a regional survey (N=12) and semi-structured interviews (N=9) within the

framework of the Sensi Class project, involving faculty members from project partner universities. The anonymised survey was conducted between April and May of 2020 and semi-structured interviews were conducted online between May 2020 and August 2021. Our investigation showed that educators with homogenous teaching environments (i.e., working exclusively in CEE countries)—i.e. the majority of teachers in public education system of CEE—largely failed to see diversity in their classrooms and when exposed students to diversity, treated it as an external phenomenon [31].

Interviews also confirmed that students tend to not have experience with diversity either. For example, one teacher suggested that “due to lack of diversity in real life, they [students] are less aware [of cultural differences].” Another teacher pointed out prevalent racism among students, raising the rhetorical question of why there are so few “others” or visible foreigners, yet there is such widespread animosity against them. Indeed, “Islamophobia without Muslims” [16] is a common manifestation of this paradox described by the teacher, persistent in both Poland and Hungary. When racism against Roma was mentioned, a teacher advocated the importance of meeting and constructive communication with members of this group, emphasising the lacking contacts of students with local minorities, let alone with other cultures. In addition, teachers were complaining about the highly theoretical resources they have about multicultural and diversity education, with little “practical knowledge” that “would sensitize people to these topics.”

To fill this gap, universities involved in the Sensi Class project created a diverse set of resources in order to provide educators with meaningful materials to teach about diversity in monocultural setting [32]. They are tailored to local CEE context rather than linked to the experiences of Western multicultural societies. These include two types of materials, assisting teachers with handling diversity within a classroom and teaching about “Others,” even if vulnerable minority groups are not part of students’ everyday life. An example of the former type of materials are pedagogical resources prepared for general and university teachers on tackling sensitive topics in the classroom in English, Czech, Estonian and Polish languages [7]. Guided by the principles of reflexive teaching, these resources offer tools for self-assessment and self-awareness as well as some practical suggestions of how to deal with sensitive topics. Sensitive topics are present in all educational systems, and are often related to different forms of diversity (e.g., ethnic, gender, religious etc). For example, in CEE, due to the strong politicisation of certain topics, such as gender issues in Poland and migration as well as Roma topics in Hungary, it is nearly unavoidable that teachers must address sensitive topics, while appropriate tools to address these issues in a classroom are largely lacking. An example of the latter type of materials are three MOOCs covering topics of Islam, gender and radicalism, as well as a set of e-modules that teachers can use in their classroom. All materials were developed by faculty in CEE region, considering the local particularities, while also incorporating values of multiculturalism and diversity.

#### *4.2 Critical thinking in the classrooms of CEE*

Similarly to multicultural education, discussion about the importance of critical thinking entered CEE pedagogical discourse in the 1990s, highlighting the obsolete nature of socialist-era teaching practices, which “generate graduates” with “superficial achievements” rather than “independently thinking, sensible adults who can process information” [7]. This, in turn, creates a certain culture of education where students who ask questions may be considered disrespectful, interrupting and shameless, and asking questions may be perceived as inappropriate [5]. Considering that one of the central goals of education is to teach students to think, or inquire about the world surrounding them, yet, the CEE educational system tends to foster group-thinking and fact-learning, rather than encourage questioning, creativity and autonomy of students, discouraging critical thinking. Meanwhile, critical thinking is fostered through various recommendations and documents at the level of the European Union, funding a number of projects that assess and promote critical thinking skills in the education systems of Europe, especially where they are most lacking – Eastern Europe.

The departing point of the Social Worlds project was precisely the deficiency in critical thinking skills among Eastern European youth – the project aimed to complement knowledge-oriented teaching that has been dominating in CEE schools with tools enabling to turn this knowledge into critical and analytical thinking skills. The project involved a phase of research assessing how students are taught to conduct social inquiry. First, participating institutions conducted desktop research and then a cross-sectional survey in the summer of 2021 of 485 students enrolled in social sciences at higher education institutions in Latvia, Estonia, Romania, Poland and Hungary. Students’ self-assessment of their critical thinking skills and the extent that these skills were taught in their studies varied greatly: we expected Estonian students to show most confidence, while their answers revealed they were the least confident in using critical thinking skills, while Hungarian students were the most confident, even though the Hungarian education system has been excessively criticised for eradicating critical thinking from the curricula in the interest of promoting national pride [21] [38].

To interpret these findings, researchers from three participating institutions conducted additional research with a focus on critical thinking practices in Hungary, Poland and Romania [9]. The authors concluded that critical thinking is “mentioned and conceptualised as an essential competence for students in different core educational documents (e.g., national curricula), thus supporting the narrative that critical thinking is an imperative part of education” [9]. Yet, despite critical thinking skills nominally declared as important, each case study demonstrated that there are major tensions and challenges to teaching critical skills in schools, which are the result of 1) critical thinking often being associated with the West, 2) critical thinking poorly rooted in the CEE education systems, 3) the lack of suitable teaching resources and materials to promote critical thinking skills. The study also found that pedagogical practices of frontal education style have hardly changed and remain ingrained until today, hindering the development of competences related to critical thinking skills.

To fill this gap, the last phase of the project Social Worlds is aimed at constructing a website in six languages (English, Polish, Romanian, Latvian, Hungarian and Estonian) with educational resources to teach or self-learn research methods as a form of promoting critical thinking skills and inspire curiosity through every step of social inquiry – formulating questions, gathering and interpreting data, and presenting results [25]. Similarly to the Sensi Class resources, these materials were also developed by faculty in CEE region who were able to contextualise these resources into the particular educational cultures. In developing these resources, there was a consensus among participating researchers that the educational resources that promote skills in social inquiry are also key in fostering independent inquiry, and thus necessary for challenging disinformation, the spread of fake news, and information overload. In other words, the initial assumption was that the social and cognitive competencies incorporated into social research methods modules within this project are crucial for raising a better educated and more aware young people in the CEE region. The project is still ongoing, and these materials will be tested by teachers in all participating countries in the fall of 2022.

## **5. Conclusion and recommendations**

Overall, this study suggested that the implementation of education policies rooted in the Western political and social cultures in CEE region may meet with unanticipated challenges that are related to historical, economic and social particularities of this region. Among important contextual factors, regional history and relations between national groups, socialist legacies, current political and social climates, and ethnic composition were discussed, all contributing to the culture of education. Two specific examples were further analysed – multicultural education and the promotion of critical thinking. Given the divergent historical and social experiences of Western and Eastern European countries, multicultural education and critical thinking in the CEE region must be situated in an entirely different context than in Western societies that are usually characterised by higher diversity and more openness to multiculturalism. Consistently with this, Eastern European societies experienced different constructs of social diversity, which is unambiguously reflected in the culture of education.

Both examples analysed also demonstrated that educational materials must be rooted in the CEE context in order to stimulate change in the largely traditional teaching methods that endorse memorisation rather than independent and critical thinking. To that end, two Erasmus+ projects were briefly introduced, both of which aimed at developing such resources. The study also has policy implications, which might assist policy-makers involved in the field of education to better formulate and implement policies in the CEE region:

- 1) Since formal education tends to be highly regulated, pedagogical resources may be more easily introduced through non-formal education;
- 2) Accessible online resources (in national languages) may be particularly apt to promote some sets of knowledge not available or discouraged through formal educational practices;
- 3) Local expertise should be prioritised when adopting policies earlier applied in Western contexts;
- 4) Knowledge exchange and best practices that promote bridging different cultures of education should be promoted at the supranational level.

Conceptual frameworks, definitions, and methodologies developed in other socio-cultural contexts might provide a solid point of reference to frame local approaches and experiences, but our study demonstrates that those must not be simply copied. When that happens, these approaches may be resented by the local population or may simply be misconstrued; in some cases, they may produce contradictory effects, such as instead of fostering multicultural education or critical thinking, provoking resistance and frustration.

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