



**GEORG ECKERT INSTITUTE
FOR
INTERNATIONAL TEXTBOOK RESEARCH**

Celler Strasse 3, D-38114 Braunschweig

Tel.: 0049 (0) 531/5 90 99-0 Fax: 00049 (0) 531/5 90 99-99

eMail: info@gei.de

Comment on Recent Public Discussion

with Regard to History Textbooks in Tuzla Canton, BaH

In Tuzla Canton the new school year started with a public debate on the teaching of the most recent history. The controversy was triggered by a statement of the “Union of Veterans” of Tuzla Canton according to which two history textbooks developed for the new school year do *“not present the objective truth on the history of BiH in the 20th century”*. The political agencies acted promptly. On September 11th, 2007, the Tuzla Canton Assembly demanded from the Tuzla Canton Government and the Ministry of Education to form an ad hoc expert commission to review the 4th- and 8th-grade history textbooks, although both books had already been approved for use in Tuzla Canton schools for the school year 2007/ 2008 by the Council for Textbook Policy at the FBiH level, which included Tuzla Canton experts. The Ministry of Education (MoE) in Tuzla followed the request of the Cantonal Assembly and set up two expert commissions. On September 13th, 2007, both expert commissions met and came to the conclusion that the reviewed textbook for the 8th grade of primary school and for the 4th grade of secondary school (authors Hadziabdic, Dervisagic, Mulic and Mehic) should be withdrawn from use in schools of the canton. The Ministry of Education immediately issued and sent the Information on withdrawal of these textbooks to the schools, PI and education inspectors on September 14th. There was no official statement about the rationale behind the withdrawal of the two history textbooks, either from the two expert commissions or from the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports or from the Cantonal Assembly. Although the decision to withdraw the two books may be – in strict legal terms – consonant with educational law, the question remains open as to why this decision has been taken, and the method by which it was taken.

It should be noted that both schoolbooks were initially subject to a strict review process, which thoroughly examined the textbooks’ adherence to the syllabi and to the *“Guidelines for Writing and Evaluation of History and Geography Textbooks for Primary and Secondary Schools in Bosnia and Herzegovina”*, signed by all ministers of education in BaH in January 2006. Both textbooks were positively evaluated by the reviewers and approved by the Ministers of

Education, i.e by the Council for Textbook Policy at the FBiH level, which includes Cantonal experts.

Unfortunately, one can only guess what reasons were behind the Tuzla Canton Education Minister's decision. Did the Minister and the reviewers follow the veterans' arguments? If so, why didn't they publicly announce this? By its almost tacit withdrawal of the textbooks the Ministry has cut off and obstructed an open, public debate about problems regarding how to teach the 20th-century history of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

What did the veterans say? The paragraphs of the books that deal with the period of the 1990s, that is, the most sensitive and most controversial part of the history of BaH, met with severe criticism. For the 1990s meant not only the coming into being of the independent and sovereign state of BaH; this decade is also inextricably associated with the violence and death, mass displacement and mass expulsion experienced by so many citizens during the war years 1992-1995.

The war veterans criticized that the two books do not deal with this period correctly: *“Regarding how the textbook should deal with the aggression against BaH, with the horrible offences and the genocide that were committed, and to mention in this context Slobodan Milosevic and Radovan Karadzic as the main organizers of crimes and genocide, we would evaluate all this as historically objective facts.”* (Open letter of the “Unija Veterana” Tuzla Canton, 6.9.2007)

Looking into the incriminated textbook, however, it becomes obvious that Radovan Karadzic is indeed expressly identified as a war criminal; the authors state that “... *Radovan Karadzic, today accused of war crimes by the International Tribunal in Den Haag ...*” threatened war and the extermination of Muslim people from the territory of BaH (8th grade history textbook, p. 140). Unlike other textbooks, the authors of the two textbooks under dispute expressly included at least small pieces of the painful history of the war in their narratives. They did not approach this with an ample account of war events, genocide, and mass expulsions, since today's history syllabi in Bosnia and Herzegovina leave no room for a fair, detailed and multi-sourced discussion of this period. Therefore, the authors felt they could not go any further and should not describe the war in more detail as this would not be backed by the syllabus. On the other hand, we agree with the veterans' statement that the authors were mistaken not to mention BaH president Alija Izetbegovic in the context of the breakdown of the Yugoslav system and the founding of the independent state of BaH. But this can easily – and will be – corrected and need not be a reason to ban a textbook outright. The relevant procedure in this case should be respected within the system in which these textbooks were approved.

The history syllabi provide the real limits, stating that history textbooks, and thus, history teaching in the classroom must finish with the recognition of the sovereign state of BaH by the European Community in April 1992 and BaH's admittance to the United Nations in May 1992.

Even though the history curriculum of Tuzla Canton foresees at least the war year 1992 in BaH, that does not allow for a comprehensive narration of the war years and its atrocities at all.

The claims of the veterans – however legitimate they may be – go simply beyond the curriculum. Here lies the crux of the matter, not with the authors' texts.

Do the veterans wish to say that the period after 1992 should also be integrated into the syllabi?

Public debate indicates a pronounced need to deal with the issues at hand in the history textbooks and the classroom. Last but not least, the war cannot be neglected anyway, as it is discussed in the public, in the media, and at home. Were the Ministers of Education making a first move in this direction when they approved a recommendation in the *Guidelines* to teach the history of the entire 20th century?

Public criticism of the disputed history textbooks was, apart from its emphasis on the period of the 1990s, also related to the presentation of the First World War, the interwar period and the Second World War. Historical research on these periods is marked by strong controversies, not only in the BaH academic and broader public, but in those of all of the successor states of the former Yugoslavia as well. Controversies, however, should not inhibit a critical discussion in a history textbook. As paragraph 2.7 of the *Guidelines* states: "*Sensitive issues / controversial themes should be stated in the textbooks, in order to be opened up for discussion.*"

Ultimately, the two disputed textbooks have actually achieved the goal of beginning an open discussion in BaH about some of the most pressing questions about the history of the country and its people.

This discussion should, then, provide impetus to initiate urgently needed debates on the reform of the history curricula in general and the one dealing with the period of the 1990s in BaH in particular. Only open discussions might pave the way for history teaching in schools in BaH, which does not conceal, but critically addresses today's most pressing questions regarding how to learn the recent history of Bosnia and Hercegovina.

Braunschweig/Germany, 17 October 2007