

## **CZECH EDUCATION AS ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT FACTORS IN MAINTAINING CZECH MINORITY AND ITS MOTHER TONGUE IN CROATIA**

Чешко образовање у Хрватској првенствено је повезано са чешком мањином у Хрватској која се у ово подручје доселила у највећој мери током 19. и почетком 20. века, а настанили су се углавном у околини града Дарувара. У овом тренутку, образовање је организовано на свим нивоима, од обданишта преко основне школе и средње школе, са могућим наставком студија чешког језика на Филозофском факултету у Загребу, и потпуно је укључено у државни образовни систем. Кроз три законска модела наставе у мањинским школама, скоро хиљаду деце учи чешки језик у Републици Хрватској. Настава се одржава или у потпуности на мањинском језику или двојезично са различитим степеном заступљености језика појединца. Поред културних, новинарских и других активности, образовање на чешком језику један је од најважнијих фактора у борби за очување чешког језика и идентитета. То значајно доприноси успоравању асимилације чешке мањине у Хрватској.

**Кључне речи:** национална мањина, Чешка, Хрватска, фактори очувања националних мањина, образовање мањина.

### **1. Czech Education as one of the most important factors in maintaining the Czech minority and its mother tongue in Croatia**

Czechs migrated in large numbers to the territory that is now Croatia, mainly in the period from the late 18th century to the early 20th century, under the Austro-Hungarian Empire, when Czechia and Croatia were within one state entity. This was a controlled colonial policy on the part of Austria, intended to resettle the territory after the Ottomans had been forced out. The Czechs settled mostly around the city of Daruvar in Western Slavonia, where a colony was created, and in larger cities such as Zagreb, Osijek and Dubrovnik.

From the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Czechs associated in the new territory, established cultural groups, libraries, Sokol, but when the Austro-

Hungarian Empire collapsed and the settlers found themselves in a different state these institutions also declined, including Czech schools. Today, Czech cultural associations – the so-called Czech Beseda's – operate in Croatia and can be found in 31 settlements that are scattered throughout the Republic. Their centre is in the town of Daruvarin Western Slavonia (about 130 kilometres east of Zagreb), where the umbrella organization of the minority – the Czech Union (Svaz Čechů) is situated. Within the Czech Beseda's there are numerous theatre and dance groups, choirs, brass bands and other groups which preserve Czech culture, customs and language. The minority is well-organized and has a rich cultural life.

In the long term, the number of Czechs in Croatia has remained relatively stable, however, at every census, their number is gradually decreasing. At the last census in 2011, less than ten thousand inhabitants declared themselves to be of Czech nationality in Croatia and less than six thousand three hundred declared Czech to be their mother tongue.

Many factors that affect both the individual and the minority, as a whole, had an effect on maintaining the Czech minority in Croatia. The literature traditionally lists factors such as:

- family
- school
- cultural organizations
- media
- nationalistic factor
- religion (Church)
- national and local language policies
- social-psychological factors (identification, attitudes, social networks)
- other (such as industrialization/urbanization, media development, political domination, endogamy, stigmatization....).

Like many other minorities, in the Czech minority in Croatia the family is the most important factor in maintaining ethnicity and mother tongue, where language is automatically transferred from parents to children. The selection of a life partner plays a major role here. However, since the Czech minority in Croatia is not a closed community, but lives together with the majority population – Croats, along with members of other nationalities, the number of mixed marriages is growing, due to which lan-

guage transfer within families is made difficult or is completely broken. In many families Czech parents do not speak Czech to their children and that not only in the presence of a partner who does not speak Czech, but also in cases when they are alone with the child. Thus children do not learn Czech as their mother tongue naturally from the earliest age.

The possibility to acquire and enrich the mother tongue, but above all to use this language at all, is offered by numerous cultural associations: theatre and folklore ensembles, choirs, brass bands and other groups that care about the preservation of Czech culture, customs and language. These also play a major role in creating a sense of belonging, awareness of their roots and learning about national traditions and culture.

The media play an important role. The Czech minority can hear Czech language regularly over local Radio station Daruvar Broadcasting, but information and publishing activities in Czech for the entire Czech minority are mainly provided by the newspaper-publishing institution Jednota, which publishes magazines for adults and children, textbooks for schools and books in Czech language. For many, this is the single most important source of contemporary literary language. The bulletins in Czech-Croatian or even only in Croatian are then published by some Beseda's that prepare them at their own expense. The opportunity to watch TV programs in Czech is very limited.

In relatively recent times, the nationalistic factor, caused by ethnic disagreements and the wars of the 1990s have had a strong effect. While for a part of Czech minority members, this led to stronger identification with the majority population ("since we are living in Croatia, we are after all Croats"), for the other part on the other hand, often quite assimilated members of the minority, these frictions between nations led to a greater awareness of their origin and strengthening of national feelings.

In contrast to many other minorities, the church does not play a big role in maintaining national feeling and mother tongue, since the religious beliefs of majority of Czechs are indistinguishable from the majority population. A certain role is played here by the fact that local Czechs do not have the possibility to attend Mass in the Czech language, and it is difficult to estimate of how big an interest there would be for a Mass in Czech, as the local minority has been accustomed to the Croatian Mass for years. The exception can be found in the settlement Bjeliševac in the Požega

region and Zdenca in Daruvar region where there is a greater number of Protestants, and in recent years ecclesiastics from the Czech Republic have been regular visitors there. But in recent years several masses led by clerics from the Czech Republic (eg. the auxiliary bishop of Prague Vaclav Maly who visited Daruvar in 2014) were frequently visited and members of the Czech choir rehearsed also Czech spiritual songs which the occasional Mass in Czech accompanies.

An important factor in the existence of minorities and the preservation of minority languages in a given territory is the policy of the state and of the regions, in which the minorities live. Despite relatively well-developed minority laws in Croatia, there are problems with their implementation in practice. The Czech minority in Croatia has secured its right to education in the minority language, information in the minority language and in some settlements, the right of a minority official language. It is also protected by the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. However, even in the very centre of the minority in Daruvar, those rights were violated or denied to such an extent that, in 2005 even the European Council noted it. For some time the policy of the state and especially of the local government in Daruvar and its surroundings became one of the most important factors that influenced assimilation of minority members (in this case negative) due to limited communication opportunities of minority members to use the Czech language. The latest developments on the Croatian political scene, this time at the highest state level, again raise concerns among members of national minorities in Croatia, as some political parties have included restrictions on the rights of national minorities in their programs.

In case of certain limitations of the possibility of language transfer within the family, minority schools are of growing importance since children there have the opportunity to learn the language of their parents and grandparents and learn customs and traditions. Their presence greatly slows the assimilation of minorities, since it allows regular contact with the language even to those minority members who do not speak Czech at home. Some parents openly admit that they are putting their children in Czech schools in the hope that their children would learn Czech in school and make up for what they themselves neglected. Others rely on Czech

schools for their children to improve their spoken and written Czech and develop the knowledge gained at home and out of school.

Czech education in Croatia is organized at all levels, from kindergarten through primary school to Czech high school (Gymnasium), with possible continuity at the Faculty of Philosophy in Zagreb to study Czech studies.

The first Czech elementary school was founded in Daruvar in 1922, i.e. shortly after the Czechs found themselves in a foreign country once Austria-Hungary collapsed. It was a private school, which was named after Jan Amos Komensky. Opening of other schools in Hercegovac, Kaptol, Bjelovar and elsewhere followed. In addition to private schools, Czech departments at Croatian state schools and Czech supplementary schools also emerged (i.e. extracurricular classes of the Czech language and geography).

Today, Czech schools are incorporated into the Croatian state education system, and three models of instruction established by the state are being used at Czech schools (Staňová Brdarová, 2007:2):

1. model A – minority language has the same number of hours as the Croatian language and all subjects are taught in minority language;
2. model B – minority language has the same number of hours as the Croatian language and history, geography, art and musical arts are taught in the minority language; other subjects are taught in Croatian;
3. model C (so-called care of the mother tongue and culture) – 3 to 5 hours of lessons a week are taught in the minority language at a Croatian school. These are lessons in language, literature and culture (musical arts, geographical and historical reality, folk traditions and customs, possibly religion) .

In the 2014/2015 school year **Model A** was used at:

- two kindergartens (in Daruvar and Končanica),
- two eight-year elementary schools (Daruvar school of Jan Amos Komenský, Končanica school of Josef Růžička and their district schools) and
- one district school (elementary school of Ivan Nepomuk Jemeršić in Ivanovo Selo).

Czech schools are focused on maintaining Czech language and Czech customs. The curricula are consistent with the curriculum for Croatian schools, additionally teaching Czech. The content of geography and history curriculum is adapted and expanded for issues related to the Czech minority in Croatia and to the Czech Republic. In the first seven years Czech is used as the medium of instruction, in the eighth grade the instruction is provided bilingually in order to enable smooth transition of students to Croatian schools.

Schools provide a wide choice of optional activities (sports, theatre, puppetry, literary, artistic, amateur, music, singing, dancing groups etc., as well as before and after-school care, which are not typically provided in Croatian schools) to their students. Several times a year they organize joint programs and parades, which offer the students opportunities where they can present their skills. The schools try to make use of the newest technologies, e.g. magic boxes in kindergartens. In these and many other ways Czech schools are striving to offer education that is as varied as possible and of the best possible quality. ČZŠ J. A. Komenského Primary School was selected for participation in an experimental project of the Croatian Ministry of Education in the years 2005-2010 aiming at a reform of the national educational standard, the so-called HNOS (Hrvatski nacionalni obrazovni standard – Croatian national educational standard), within which the teachers had to attend a number of training sessions and seminars.

According to the **model B** Czech was being taught at Daruvar grammar school (Gymnasium), which is also the only high school in Croatia offering a programme of study in the Czech language. Some subjects are instructed in Czech, others in Croatian, depending on available teachers. Upon graduation the students can even choose a graduation exam in Czech language.

Teaching of Czech by **model C** started last year at:

- one kindergarten (Međurić),
- 19 elementary schools (Dežanovac, Grubišno Polje, Međurić, Lipik, Sirač, Šibovac, Zagreb, Kaptol, Hercegovac, Rijeka, Lipovljani, Sisak, Bjeliševac, Gornji Sredani, Bjelovar, Virovitica) and district schools (Dioš, Trojeglava, Velki Zdenci), and
- 4 high schools (Daruvar, Zagreb, Virovitica, Grubišno Polje), in various regions in Croatia.

In the 2014/2015 school year approximately 1,000 children in Croatia were taught Czech according to the three models in total, compared to previous school years, with gradually increasing interest in the teaching model C.

In the current school year 2015/2016 the situation is very similar in terms of the number of schools where the Czech language is taught, as well as the number of students interested in these lessons. However, there has been a significant change at the Daruvar grammar school (Gymnasium) which used to be the only school applying the model B: Due to an insufficient number of students, it was not possible to open a separate Czech class unlike in previous years and therefore in the first year the Czech language is taught “only” as an additional subject completing the classical Croatian education – so, in fact, corresponding to model C. Model B is applied to Czech education only in the second, third and fourth grades of Daruvar Gymnasium and it is uncertain what education at this school will look like in the years to come, i.e. whether it will be possible to find enough students to open a separate Czech class and offer education according to model B.

Czechs traditionally print their own textbooks and teaching materials in Czech for the needs of Czech education in Croatia. These are based on their Croatian counterparts and supplemented for Czech Republic history, geography, cultural aspects, etc. However, since the new models of education were introduced, the publishing of new textbooks has faced several difficulties: While for model B, i.e. for the gymnasium, the textbooks were purchased in the Czech Republic, for model C, only the textbook for the first year is available. Textbooks for other grades have been awaiting approval by the competent ministry for several years already. To teach Czech, teachers also use the Czech monthly magazine for children *Dětskýkoutek* and bilingual school magazines.

Czech schools cooperate with schools in the Czech Republic and they organize tours for students and training courses for teachers regularly. A number of events are organized by the Czech Union, e.g. the Winter School of Creative Drama, Our Spring (Naše jaro – performances in the areas of drama/recitation, folklore, literature and fine arts) or the Symposium on the Czech Language, which offers the possibility of further education for teachers. Additionally, in the school year 2015/2016 the third edition of

the Language and Creative Writing Olympics was organized by the Czech Union, the Bjelovar-Bilogora Region, both Czech primary schools and the gymnasium, and with the help of Czech teachers sent by the Czech Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports. Furthermore, a new Facebook page entitled *Český mateřský jazyk* (Czech mother tongue) was launched this year in order to promote the necessity of looking after the mother tongue.

Regarding the Czech educational system in Croatia, I would like to accentuate several issues that affect the present form of minority education and will also affect the future:

### **1. Securing teaching staff**

Besides two teachers that are sent yearly from the Czech Republic starting from the mid-nineties and who assist the local teachers in teaching, all teaching staff is secured by the minority from their own members. Therefore, the inability to obtain education at universities in Czech language is increasingly being felt as a problem. It is possible to study only the Czech language at the Faculty of Philosophy in Zagreb, it is not possible to study other subjects in the Czech language. And education in the Czech Republic is not strongly supported. Therefore, the vast majority of teachers at Czech schools are people who were born in Croatia and attended school there. Usually they are aware of their lack of knowledge of the Czech language, insufficient contact with contemporary literary language, and especially their lack of vocabulary. They often do not speak to their students in the literary language, but rather with commonly spoken Czech blended with elements from dialects – literary Czech then becomes only a matter of Czech language classes. Especially the science teachers are faced with difficulties since they lack the knowledge of Czech professional terminology, which they have to learn themselves. Thus higher demands are placed upon them in comparison to teachers working at Croatian schools. Even the Czech language teachers are mostly expatriates (or even Croats) who graduated from Czech Studies at Zagreb University and do not have sufficient contact with contemporary Czech language.

The problem of insufficient number of teachers has deepened by extending Czech language lessons to other schools and increasing the number of hours in schools, where it had been taught up to now. The Czech



Union is trying to solve this problem by organizing workshops and seminars for teachers and every year the minority teachers also attend courses in the Czech Republic, e.g. the Language Course for Expatriates held in the Czech town of Dobruška, organized by the Institute for Language and Preparatory Studies of Charles University in cooperation with the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs, summer schools, a methodology course for Czech language teachers, weekly seminars for teachers held in the Czech Republic, etc.

For minority education it would be very helpful if the teachers had the opportunity to study in the Czech Republic, e.g. stays of one or two semesters at Czech universities. However, before Croatia's entry into the European Union, expatriates could only study in the Czech Republic as foreigners from third countries, which was quite complicated from the administrative point of view. There are currently new possibilities of joining exchange study programs like Erasmus+, CEEPUS and others, offering exchange stays and possibilities of hosting. Among expatriate students there are already some who are making use of these new opportunities: There are currently two students from the Daruvar region studying at Czech universities. Both of them study the Czech language.

## **2. Knowledge of language by children**

In recent years, the composition of children in Czech schools is changing. While previously these schools were attended by children from Czech families, today a growing number of children come from mixed or entirely Croatian marriages, who generally do not speak Czech at home or outside school. In schools, the Czech language to a certain extent is thus acquiring the nature of a foreign language and Croatian is becoming the language of mutual communication between students and teachers. Yet Czech schools achieve very good results. Teachers are able to cope with considerably varying Czech knowledge in children coming in, and graduates from these schools speak Czech at a good level of active language user.

The situation is somewhat different in the case of pupils attending classes based on model C: According to the experience of some teachers, especially in bigger cities, children who learn Czech under this model usually do not speak Czech at home with their parents or are not even of

Czech origin. They simply use this opportunity to learn a foreign language free of charge. Logically then, education starts with the very basics.

### **3. Participation of teachers in the social life of the community**

In the past, teachers used to be the providers of the cultural life of the minority – they organized cultural events at Beseda's, rehearsed theatre plays, and singing and dance performances. Through their activities, they naturally connected schools with minority associations, acting as models, while drawing the young generation of expatriates to the associations and encouraging them to participate in their activities.

Nowadays, the teachers belonging to the current young generation usually teach at several schools at the same time in order to fulfil the necessary number of lessons. As a result, they have less free time and moreover they do not feel attached to a particular school or town. Therefore many of them do not take part in the cultural life of the minority at all and so they do not participate in the activities of schools and associations anymore. In this way, the only young people who join the associations are those who find their way to them by themselves. For the associations, which depend on the voluntary work of their members, this can mean a gradual decrease in the number of young and active members.

### **4. The possibility of continued education in the Czech language**

Limited opportunities to continue their education in the Czech language after completing elementary school have unfortunately had rather negative effects. After the completion of Czech elementary school many young people go on to Croatian secondary school, thereby communication in Czech is reduced to the benefit of Croatian, particularly in terms of communication about technical subjects. This limitation of communication in Czech is, however, even more significant in the event of secondary education termination and continuation of one's studies at the university, which in Daruvar region necessarily means departure from the minority region (mostly) to the environment completely Croatian – this limits even communication within family.

In recent years, due to poorer economic conditions and job opportunities in Daruvar region, after leaving school many young people permanently move out from minority environment, which often leads to severing ties and faster assimilation.

Czech education in Croatia is facing other issues related, among other things, to the question of financing the operation of schools or publishing textbooks. Let me quote the advisor for Czech schools J. Staňová Brdarová (Štrumlová Tučková, 2015:4-5):

We have to fight for the kindergarten in Končanica. This year the Ministry of Education refused at the last minute to contribute to the summer school for seventh grade pupils. The Agency for Education did not appoint the heads of expert committees for the minority. Even the curricula for the education of Czech language and culture under the model C still have not been approved. In addition to all these issues, we will have to undergo significant changes, like all schools in Croatia. These consist of introducing the nine year primary school and changes in the curriculum.

The nine year primary school should be introduced in Croatia from the next school year, i.e. 2015/2016.

Czech Education is an important factor in preventing assimilation of the Czech minority in Croatia, or at least markedly slowing this assimilation. This is particularly evident in the settlements, where there are no Czech schools or where these have been cancelled in the past for various reasons; language was transferred to the next generation to a lesser extent and the closing of schools in many cases has led to faster assimilation – minority associations have gradually disappeared in these settlements as well. It is with this in mind that some parents seek to introduce Czech at Croatian schools at least as an optional subject. Thus, in recent years, the Czech language lessons are being renewed in schools where these once existed, and are even being introduced to new schools. Since the late nineties the school buildings were expanded or redesigned, new textbooks under the new curricula are being issued. There is constant work on improving minority education and due to the attention given to pupils and the way of working with them, a multicultural approach and interconnection of teaching with minority life, Czech schools have been for years considered exemplary in Croatia and abroad.

Currently, Czech language is being taught to nearly 1,000 children, which is a tenth of all the children in Croatia learning minority languages. The existence and retention of minority education appears, besides upbringing in families and minority activities, one of the most important factors of minority language retention in a certain environment, since it provides the new generations with language acquisition, knowledge of traditions and customs and development of national identity. It significantly contributes to slowing down the assimilation of ethnic minorities. The results of the last census confirm this slowdown: In the Czech minority, the decrease of the number of members was lower compared to most other nationalities in Croatia.

Education always has to exist in conjunction with other factors that support the preservation of the national minority and of the minority language in a majority environment; factors such as the above mentioned family, cultural life, media, language policy etc. Nowadays, as the structure and functioning of families change, the importance of other factors is growing. Therefore we need to put more emphasis on education itself. For maintaining and developing it further in the next years, the key point is to ensure qualified teaching staff, but also a sufficient number of children attending Czech schools. The preservation of the minority language would also be encouraged by opportunities for greater contact with contemporary Czech language, not only in lessons, but also outside of school, e.g. the possibility to watch Czech Television and listen to Czech Radio which unfortunately has not been possible in the last two decades. Apart from the possibility of Czech Studies at the University of Zagreb, there is a lack of opportunities to continue education in the Czech language or to study a different discipline in the Czech language. Strengthening contacts with the current Czech culture and language would represent a new boost for the local Czech minority and the Czech education system.

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### Abstract

Czech education in Croatia is associated primarily with the Czech minority in Croatia that moved to this area mainly during the 19th and early 20th century and settled mostly in the surroundings of the town of Daruvar. Currently, education is organized at all levels, from kindergarten through elementary school to Czech high school, with possible continuity of Czech language studies at the Faculty of Philosophy in Zagreb, and is fully

incorporated into the state's education system. Following three statutory models of teaching in minority schools, nearly a thousand children currently study Czech in the Republic of Croatia. Lessons are held either in the minority language completely or bilingually with varying allotment of individual language usage.

Next to the cultural, journalistic and other activities, Czech education is one of the most important factors in the struggle to maintain the Czech language and identity. It significantly contributes to the slowing of assimilation of the Czech minority in Croatia.

**Keywords:** national minority, Czech, Croatia, factors maintaining national minority, minority education.

### **Biographical statement**

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