

Citizenship Education in the Czech Republic

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Background information

Citizenship education in the Czech Republic has a long tradition, reaching back to the 19th century.¹ The first law on citizenship education² was adopted on 7 February 1919, three months after the creation of independent republic. Ondřej Matějka, a historian and leading expert on citizenship education, believes that this period resulted in a positive legacy: strong democratic ethos; the above mentioned act; a relatively long tradition of civil society and an experience with modern society (including e.g. the emergence of a dense network of public libraries).³

Subsequently however, long periods of oppression during the Nazi and communist dictatorships eroded the favourable conditions. After 1948, communists demoralized and corrupted the society with promises of material wealth. Opposition was weakened and many leading figures were forced to exile. Civil society was systematically prosecuted and citizenship education was replaced with massive propaganda and political indoctrination. It is therefore no surprise that when communism fell in 1989, Czechs held a deep distrust for the state and suspicion of any kind of civic or political education.

It took 20 years, a deepening crisis of political legitimacy, a new generation of politicians unburdened by the past but exposed to experiences abroad (within EU and beyond), and unrelenting advocacy of the civil society, to realize that civic activism and individualized initiatives cannot substitute systematic citizenship education, a vital instrument to nurture free and critically-minded citizens. In 2009, a round-table brought together NGOs, Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports (MŠMT), universities, schools, and professionals to discuss prospects for citizenship education. It resulted in efforts to address citizenship education systematically and for the long-term, including the founding of Civic Education Centre, the only institution designed to pursue this goal. The Centre was established in 2009 with initial financial support from the MŠMT as an independent department of Masaryk University in Brno. In 2014 the Centre moved to Charles University in Prague. Apart from this limited initial fund from the MŠMT, the Centre is financed exclusively by grants, with no systematic support from the government.

Definition of citizenship education

There is no official definition of citizenship education. Initial concepts defined in 2008 and 2009 emphasized core principles rather than definitions, trying to firmly establish the field as a part of liberal democracy and defend it from accusations of indoctrination, propaganda and

¹ That time, nationalist and labour clubs and societies were prominent, operating under the 1867 act (15 November 1867 Act on the Right of Association).

² Act no. 67/1919 adopted on 7 February 1919 on creating public courses of citizenship education, abolished in 1959. It proclaimed, inter alia, that "The state itself is obliged to take upon itself the political education of all citizens as one of its foremost and noblest goals."

³ Interview with the author, Prague, 3rd March 2015

political manipulation. The German example proved useful, particularly the principles defined in “Beutelsbach Consensus”.⁴

While Hloušková and Pol (2006) or Rabušicová and Rabušic (2008) consider citizenship education as a part of lifelong learning linked with active citizenship, a clear definition of active citizenship is absent. Analyses conducted by Civic Education Centre confirm a lack of definition and long-term strategy in the Czech Republic and Europe (Smékal et al., 2010; Protivínský & Dokulilová, 2012). Civic Education Centre therefore uses a working definition:

Citizenship education empowers citizens to actively engage in public affairs and contribute to developing a democratic society in an informed and responsible way.

Ecosystem of the formal and non-formal citizenship education⁵

In the Czech education system, citizenship education takes place in two distinct groups: (a) children and youth (initial learning) and (b) adults (Kalina & Matějka, 2013).

a) Children and youth

- Official curriculum includes citizenship education particularly from the secondary level (age 11-15), although some aspects are already included on the primary level. The issue is mostly covered in a specific subject (civics), which includes a multitude of related topics, compulsory for the teachers to cover. Moreover, parts of skills and knowledge related to citizenship education are covered in the cross-curricular theme titled Civic Education for Democracy (Jeřábek, Tupý et al., 2007), which should somehow permeate through all subjects. In practice, teachers mostly focus on passing information, without sufficient attention to developing skills and forming opinion. For example, current issues are seldom discussed, if at all. The official curriculum unfortunately allocates minimum time for citizenship education, without suggesting appropriate teaching methods. It satisfies itself with target formulation, lacking real content and impact. To summarize, citizenship education is not adequately covered in schools. The Association of Civics Teachers shares this view.⁶
- Education in schools includes a number of projects employing methods of non-formal education. These projects are implemented by NGOs (often in cooperation with the teacher), filling the gaps in official curriculum. Examples include pupil parliaments, project-based learning, community activities, actions against racism, etc.
- No uniform policy exists for citizenship education and individual actors are not bound by formal rules. Non-formal citizenship education takes place independently in youth organizations under different definitions and rules. Major organizations often adopt definitions and methods from abroad.

⁴ See http://www.confusingconversations.de/mediawiki/index.php/Beutelsbach_Consensus. The consensus defines three basic principles of citizenship education: prohibition of indoctrination; admitting controversy; and encouraging independent thinking in students.

⁵ Formal education is realized in educational institutions, with legally defined functions, objectives, subjects, methods and assessment systems (Palán 2003). In the Czech Republic therefore typically schools, which follow official curricula. Non-formal learning is realized outside of the official education system, mostly voluntarily – and does not result in officially recognized academic degree. In the Czech context this would mostly take place in youth clubs, organized by NGOs or affiliated to schools, but happening outside of the official teaching hours.

⁶ See <http://www.obcankari.cz/kdo-jsou-obcankari>

b) Adults

Even though citizenship education takes multiple forms (MŠMT, 2007, p. 9), Palán (2003) suggested that in the context of lifelong learning, the main categories respect the following model:

- Learning in institutions of higher education leading to a diploma (formal education).
- Other education (non-formal education)
 - Further professional education (e.g. courses for bureaucrats in their respective fields, with aspects relevant to citizenship education)
 - Leisure education (extending into citizenship education, e.g. in libraries)
 - Direct citizenship education (community activities, awareness campaigns, courses, experiential learning; sometimes focused on political engagement)

Organizations primarily focusing on citizenship education for adults are virtually non-existent. The situation is comparably better in initial learning, however even here citizenship education remains to be one of several aspects rather than the primary focus of the organizations.⁷

One of the main obstacles to citizenship education is funding. There is no long-term, systematic financial support from the government. Most activities are funded as individual projects from public funds (e.g. European Social Fund, European Commission, Youth in Action), or by private foundations (e.g. the Open Society Fund Prague, the Via Foundation, the Czech Environmental Partnership Foundation) or political foundations (e.g. Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung).

Legal environment

Citizenship education in the Czech Republic is not governed by a specific law. After persistent and systematic lobbying, the Chamber of Deputies of the Parliament of the Czech Republic adopted a declaratory Resolution in support of citizenship education on 30 October 2014.⁸ Neither this Resolution, nor any other official document, constitutes a systematic and strategic support of the state for citizenship education.

Existing partial strategies and policies have little impact, as they seldom carry concrete measures or budget. Examples include the Strategy of the MŠMT for Lifelong Learning⁹ or the Strategy of Library Development 2011-2015. The Czech Republic adopted the Declaration of the Council of Europe¹⁰ and the Strategic Framework for European Cooperation in Education and Vocational Training (ET 2020). The Czech education system addresses active citizenship in its Education Strategy 2020 (MŠMT, 2014). While official curricula include various references to citizenship education, the Education Act does not mention it at all. Declaratory mentions of citizenship education thus primarily serve NGOs as a footing for advocacy.

⁷For example: NGOs: *Center for Democracy in Education, People in Need, Agora Central Europe*; private sector: *Frank Bold, DOX – Centre for Contemporary Art*; other initiatives: *Association of Civics Teachers, Czech High School Union*.

⁸Návrh usnesení Poslanecké sněmovny k podpoře občanského vzdělávání <http://www.psp.cz/sqw/sd.sqw?cd=1700&o=7>

⁹"Lifelong learning can significantly contribute to educating reasonable, critical and independently thinking citizens aware of their own dignity and respecting the rights and freedoms of others; able to contribute to developing democracy and civil society." (MŠMT, 2007, p. 46)

¹⁰Committee of Ministers' Declaration and programme on education for democratic citizenship, based on the rights and responsibilities of citizens (1999) and Committee of Ministers Recommendation on Education for Democratic Citizenship. CM/Rec (2002)

Stakeholders

There is an abundance of stakeholders for citizenship education. This article only mentions those that were actively engaged:

- Teachers of all grades
- Pupils and students
- School headmasters and responsible authorities
- Government authorities, particularly from the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports (MŠMT)
- Local and national politicians
- NGO workers and independent experts
- Public libraries
- Media

Challenges

Citizenship education faces a multitude of challenges – describing them all would merit a separate article, the most pertinent ones being:

- Ensuring a long-term strategy for citizenship education, including a stable and sustainable framework on the state level, with transparent financial support for individual actors.
- Introducing citizenship education as a distinct field of enquiry and practice, where politicians and population would not suspect it as an instrument of indoctrination, but rather appreciate it as effective defence against propaganda, and value its principles of impartiality and non-partisanship
- Gradual and sustained transformation of the education system (review of key documents, system of teacher training, empowerment of civics teachers, etc.)
- Improving the work of media
- Providing a legal framework for citizenship education
- Careful analysis and evaluation of existing projects to ensure long-term coherence and improve impact
- Ability to quickly react to burning social challenges, such as socially excluded communities or immigration

This article is based on literature research. Unfortunately, only few well-researched resources are available in the Czech Republic. To fill in the gaps, the author drew on outputs from expert conferences, roundtables, and his own experiences from five years of working at the Civic Education Centre. On specific issues, he interviewed selected experts: Ondřej Matějka (co-founder of the Civic Education Centre and the First Deputy Director at The Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes – questions on history), Alena Hesová (Research Institute of Education – questions on curricula and legal basis), Tereza Vávrová (Antikomplex – ecosystem of formal and non-formal education), Michal Řezáč (the Association of Civics Teachers – situation in schools).

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