



National Identity of the Czechs in Croatia in the Time of Globalization

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to point out the importance of national identity in the time of globalization on the example of the Czech minority in Croatia. Although national identity is often seen as a potential source of xenophobia and conflict, the Czech minority in Croatia is a model example of a functional coexistence and co-operation of more nationalities within a single state without full assimilation on the one hand or ethnic conflicts on the other. Czech schools and their teachers have an important role to play in preserving Czech identity in Croatia. That is why we focused our attention on how they perceive their role in the preservation of Czech national identity in the next generation as well. Through in-depth interviews with twelve educators, by open encoding and categorization, we identified the core category we called responsibility towards the minority. The results show that teachers perceive their profession in a wider context as important for the Czech minority for several reasons: 1) disseminate knowledge of the Czech language, 2) participate in the cultural life of the minority and encourage the involvement of children, 3) encourage children to pride and love for Czech origin. The key finding is that teachers and schools are open to all nationalities. What might appear to be an obstacle seems to be beneficial in terms of assimilation, because the Czech language and culture is also interested in other nationalities, and globalization itself in this case contributes to the preservation of national identity.

Keywords: Nationality, identity, minority, school, globalization

1. Background

The present World is trying to avoid such an emphasis on ethnicity or nationality, tends to wipe out cultural characteristics and prefers “the absence of a clearly defined identity” (Kreisslová, 2013: 27). The justification for such a demand lies in a globalization that not only degraded communication and information barriers but also significantly disrupted national and state borders. On national identity, today, “in times of expanding world globalization, is often seen

as something impractical, even as an anachronism or potential source of xenophobia and conflict” (Šatava, 2009: 20).

On the one hand, we are talking about weakening the significance of national identity due to globalization processes that dissolve it into transnational affiliations; on the other hand, in contrast to this tendency, we can see the gradual revival of ethnic trends which has reflected the idea of cultural pluralism and the paradoxical pursuit of public expression of national identity (Kočí, 2017). This need for identifying features is evident especially for national minorities who can show themselves by demonstration to belong to a certain group and at the same time define themselves against the majority, which usually does not solve problems related to national identity (Kreisslova, 2013). “There are often traumatizing issues of personal identity, the role of nationality in choosing a life partner, the issue of raising children and their attendance at (minority) schools, time disabilities related to “national activities”, in some cases even torturous internal problems the question of perspectives and the actual survival of the given population” (Šatava, 2009: 47). These are the life themes, which are also facing the generations of Croatian Czechs. Though they are not migrants but descendants of centuries-old migrants, these generations are similarly going through a process of seeking their own identities that can lead to isolation and exclusivity in their original identity or, on the contrary, to identifying the values of the receiving country and transforming their own national identity (Stehlíková, 2015). However, the Czech minority in Croatia is not an example of either of these extreme solutions. Contrary to many other cases recorded in history, their presence in Croatia did not cause ethnic conflicts or political separatism, nor complete assimilation in the form of merging with the majority population. We find a moderate stream that does not attract much attention in the professional circles and is still relatively little mapped, while we believe that the Czech minority in Croatia is a remarkable model example of the non-conflict cohabitation of the minority with the majority society.

2. Methods

The Czech minority in Croatia has been facing assimilation tendencies for more than two centuries, but the number of individuals reporting to Czech nationality in Croatia is declining. Among the factors that currently play the most part in the preservation of the Czech minority in Croatia is education in the Czech language, i.e. the Czech minority school. Concrete responsibility is, of course, transferred to the teachers of these minority schools. Our aim was therefore to find out how teachers at Czech schools in Croatia perceive their profession in relation to the preservation of Czech national identity in the next generation as well. In the first half of 2018, using qualitative research methods, we conducted an in-depth interview with

teachers of Czech schools in Croatia. We strived to make the conversation as free as possible, allowing participants to respond freely at their own discretion. The interview started with the introductory question: “What does it mean to be a teacher at a Czech school in Croatia?” and depending on the participant's narrative, we asked for additional questions. We had only thematic instructions, not specific questions. This specific type of semi-structured interviewing is often referred to as a guided interview, which “is a more structured than a completely open narrative interview due to predetermined topics and is used especially when the research goal is limited to specific topics” (Kreisslová, 2013: 62). We obtained the research participants for our research intention on the basis of previous research cooperation (Kočí, Preissová Krejčí, 2017) and using the method of the snowball when we gained further contacts from our participants. The interviews were conducted with 12 teachers, whose testimonies were recorded with their consent on the recording equipment and subsequently rewritten into text form. For the needs of analysis and interpretation, we have anonymized the interviews and attributed to them the appropriate P1-P12 tag. Data analysis was done using open encoding and categorization techniques. For the purposes of this paper, we select partial results related to the category “Responsibility towards the minority”.

3. Results

Responsibility towards the minority is a topic that has been repeated in most of the conversations. Teachers immediately after questioning reflected the importance of education in the Czech language for the maintenance of the Czech minority in Croatia. This suggests that the question of identity is a topic that is solved for a long time among the countrymen, especially from the point of view of Czech. “To be a teacher is a responsible profession and to be a Czech teacher, this is even more duplicated, because assimilation is known, children are still less Czech at home” (P6). The research participant indirectly draws attention to the fact that the school's responsibility for preserving the language is largely taken over by the family, because mainly as a result of the growth of mixed marriages, Czech as a primary (mother tongue) gradually disappears. At this point, the question of national identity in relation to the choice of partner and the education of children, or parents' decision, is manifested by the children joining minority or Croatian school. Teachers note that it is not obvious that Czech parents will register their children in the Czech school. “At home, less and less children speak Czech, I can see also my friends, whom I have attended the Czech elementary school and who speak with children in Croatia at home and do not even go to Czech school. And I do not understand why even those who speak Czech at home decide to give a child to a Croatian school” (P8).

Teachers with experience from Croatian schools generally declare that they are better at working in a Czech school where they feel more at home (P11). At the same time, they draw attention to the fact that pupils in Czech schools are more decent and at the same time better at learning, probably due to higher demands for multilingual skills. In addition to reflecting the differences between teachers in the minority and majority schools, one must note the emphasis on the emotional aspect of identity. “Teacher at the Czech school in Croatia is unlike teachers working only in Croatian schools, exceptional by trying to transfer the mother tongue of ancestors to future generations and instilling their love for that tongue, and to the lands where these ancestors came from” (P1). It is the emotions that play an irreplaceable role in maintaining a national identity. As stated by historian Miroslav Hroch (2009: 233), “the relationship with the nation always contains certain emotional elements. Inter-war anthropology has already defined a nation as a “community of emotional life,” with emotional ties to the nation being derived from everyday customs, forms of thought and action.”

The emotional side of identity is best developed through experience, so emphasis is placed on interconnecting the school and cultural life of the minority, not only with pupils, but as the interviews show, it is also essential to bring close the cantors to the cultural life of the minority in which they are actively involved. “The teacher at Czech school has a great importance in maintaining the Czech language and in general in developing minority education and all the cultural and cultural events in this region where Czechs live and work” (P2). The personal example of a teacher plays a very important role in the transfer of Czech identity to pupils. “Part of our work is to instill some value and tradition to the children to respect their origins, so it is important to follow them in this example and show that it is just as important to us” (P4). In this sense, it is essential that Czech teachers want the Czech national identity in Croatia to be preserved, assimilated and globalized in spite of it. On the contrary, it is trying to use globalization to its advantage. It is not just about the fact that Czech children are enrolled in Croatian schools, but also children of Croatian or Serbian origin, are also enrolled in Czech schools. “We try to keep it if the school was not, it would have been long since lost to assimilation. And when we write both Croatian and Serbian children, it means they will not get lost that they will keep it” (P5).

4. Conclusion

We can ask: Is it real that a national minority living outside the borders of its own state has retained its national identity in spite of global globalization processes or even cultivated its own culture? Modernization and globalization processes seek to remove man from the national identification framework, which may have numerous positive effects on unprivileged and stereotyped simple behaviors towards the other. “At the same time, however, the plural

character of this world robbed of the need for a clear grouping and identity as unity really becomes a problem” (Kreisslová, 2013: 27). Teachers at Czech schools in Croatia are trying to help find their place in the world, to discover their identity in the knowledge that “identity is not one, but that different identities co-exist alongside each other, regrouping in different situations and creating hierarchies” (Řezníková, 2014: 238). The existence of Czech minorities abroad on the example of Croatia shows that Czech national identity beyond the borders of the state is real and even sustainable for centuries without the transfer of modern technologies into culture and without the existence of a transnational family without the ancestral country being an actual part of its life experience. In this, we see the unique potential that the Czech minority in Croatia carries with us, which is preceded by modern anthropological knowledge and showing how complicated the construction of human identity is.

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