

Enhancement of constructivist and procedural concepts of good citizenship and civic identity in the Czech educational framework

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ABSTRACT: This paper identifies the main flaws, dilemmas and challenges concerning the concept of civic education and teaching democracy in the Czech schooling system after 1989. Special focus is placed on the urgent need for the application of more pluralist, constructivist and procedural approaches that would enhance the traditional concepts of social science education based on facts and typologies. In this regard, methods and trends promoting the principle of civic education as a multidimensional and everyday phenomenon are applied, since such understanding of civic identity has become even more urgent in recent two years with the reflection of issues concerning the SARS-CoV-2 situation. To suggest and analyse possible means to this end, the study outlines two dominant causes of the low prestige and effectivity of civic education in the Czech Republic: first, the implicitly ideological and universalist character of the current national curriculum, which is not able to accept social values as a permanently flowing and contextually based discourse; second, the prevalence of ethnic attributes in the process of national identification which impede any relevant efforts to treat collective identity and citizenship in an open pluralist way. Nonetheless, the main focus of the paper lies in its empirical part where the fundamental pillars and particular activities from the current EU project—realised at several Czech universities and grammar schools in recent three years—are both presented and analysed. On the basis of this project analysis, the paper aims to demonstrate that together with the implementation of procedural, interpretative and constructivist understanding of social reality, even more radical questions—linked to postmodern democratic theory—such as the notion of agonist democracy, the impact of social networks, the reflection of instrumental manipulative behaviour as well as more unbiased interpretations of human liberty should be addressed in the Czech current educational discourse as well. **KEYWORDS:** civic education, Czech schooling system, ethnic nationalism, constructivism, procedural concept of democracy, agonist democracy, concept of liberty

POST-COMMUNIST CURRICULUM: TEACHING ABOUT DEMOCRACY OR TEACHING DEMOCRACY?

Urgent questions related to the socio-political issues in educational curricula and schooling processes emerged in the first decades after the Velvet Revolution of 1989 in Czechoslovakia and the establishment of the Czech Republic in 1993. The events and changes that took place were in some ways typical of East-Central European post-communist countries and in some ways unique during this period as these nations were undergoing far-reaching social, economic and cultural changes within a short period of time (Wiatr 2020; Evans & Whitefield 1998). The social sciences were understandably considered by the majority of society at that time—including a relevant amount of teachers—either as “messianic” way to replace the distorted communist interpretation of society with the “right” image of the world, or rather as a redundant subject carrying an essence inherited from the times of Marxist-Leninist interpretation of civic education which had just taken on a new façade conforming to a democratic regime. In this regard, education concerning social sciences such as civics was frequently treated as inherently biased, ideological and thus also dangerous for securing the non-political character of post-communist school system. The popular belief remained that there was no space for an objective and neutral concept of social and political education, i.e. the active and formative potential of the social sciences was to be eschewed. Needless to say, such an understanding has contributed to frequent appeals that social science should give priority in education to “more important” subjects such as biology, chemistry and maths which have been assessed as independent of an ideological perspective. This argument based on pragmatism has not vanished in the Czech Republic (and elsewhere) even in the 21st century (Halík 2008; Krámský 2007).

Hence, the introduction of political science into the educational processes both in elementary as well as in grammar schools has frequently faced one of two dominant reactions. The first is that political education itself is obsolete, as any curriculum must be ideologically motivated, and thus inimical to the traditional image of schooling as inherently apolitical dimension (Knowles & Castro 2019). The second and more mitigated view is that subjects dealing with politics can be taught in schools, but the material presented must be strictly reduced to teaching typologies and *facts* that contemporary political science uses for descriptions of politics as such. In this case, students are to acquire more or less precise knowledge of various definitions such as the typology of political parties, electoral systems, classifications of ideologies, etc. In this paradigm, learners political subjects and topics are relegated to that which can theoretically be memorized and repeated more or less verbatim (e.g. on tests and examinations). What is missing in the classroom is the communication of politics as something to be experienced as *real*, i.e. as sets and series of concrete activities, functions and positions in our everyday lives that should constantly be investigated, assessed and critiqued.

Obviously, teaching about politics solely in a *scientific* way without accounting for the value and participatory aspects seriously affects not only the level of civic knowl-

edge and education, but the form of political culture as well (Weinberg & Flinders 2018). This is especially true when the perception of *liberal democracy* is taken into consideration. According to the official concept of Czech state educational programme (RVP) as well as the dominant concepts of democracy in Czech textbooks for students, Czech students are expected to know and understand the basic definitions of democracy as theoretical concepts and not as empirical and significantly practical phenomena. The interpretation and hands-on application of these phenomena would require strong patterns of civil society as currently presupposed in the current trends in civic education (Cogan & Derricott 2000). However, this account should not be regarded as a rejection of need for theoretical understanding, since if a teacher manages to present democracy as a very complicated and polysemous political term fundamentally dependent on historical, cultural as well as ideological contexts, the concept would come to be assessed as a beneficial contribution to the development of student's critical thought and awareness, e.g. that social science terms cannot be used in the same way as biological taxonomies or mathematical languages are used.

Nevertheless, the goal this paper is to demonstrate that besides this theoretical and traditional Czech concept of *teaching about democracy*, the parallel process of *teaching democracy* should take place in the postmodern (and in the East-Central European space also post-communist) educational process. Active support of democratically participatory citizenship has been recently identified as one of the most expected educational outcomes in a Czech analytical survey of teachers on the challenges of current civic education (Dvořáková & Pajpachová 2019). This concept of teaching *something* instead of teaching *about something* should be focused more on experiencing specific situations and internalising attitudes that can be identified with the attributes of democratic political and civic culture in the 21st century as a desirable tool for all young citizens in terms of a basic orientation in central dilemmatic questions. An example of these pressing issues would be the tension between the individual's own particular idea of individual happiness and political power that determines as well as limits these ideas: Why one should defend democratic principles? Why are we supposed to care not only about our own interests and values but about the concept of civil society as well? What does it mean exactly that besides the numerous other roles and identities young people are expected to take on—friend, student, employee, athlete, artist, etc.—we are expected to be *good citizens*? How does it come that the SARS-CoV-2 situation helped to form new identities as well as cleavages and how the civic society is expected to treat them?

THE PROCEDURAL CONCEPT OF CIVIC EDUCATION AND GOOD CITIZENSHIP: A POSSIBLE PATH?

It might seem obvious that addressing questions such as what it means to be a *good citizen* requires the very definitional and theoretical approaches that we are recommending to substitute for with a more constructivist and procedural understanding of educational processes (Henderson 1996). After all, how can we recognize which authority in the contemporary postmodern society should determine desirable pat-

terns of citizenship? How should we distinguish between acceptable and inappropriate forms of political participation? In fact, if one faces the fundamental dilemma between the variability of possible meanings of political terms on the one hand, and the required patterns of political behaviour that students are expected to follow on the other, the escape into the world of universal, straightforward, unambiguous and seemingly neutral world of definitions might be assessed as a safe solution.

Still, any insistence on unequivocal definitions ignores today's social reality as well as the floating essence of value concepts, which have undergone through serious evolution and modifications over the past few centuries. Although "ordinary" issues are referred to in our everyday lives such as honour, morality, the common good, citizenship, liberty and democracy, what is usually neglected is the fact that these words have been passed down from ancient times without taking into consideration the contextual embeddedness of these terms in historical languages and social structures (Bevir 2000; MacIntyre 2013). If the meanings of the terms *democracy* and *citizenship* are derived from the perspectives of the "golden age" of Athenian concept of politics, the understanding of such concepts and meanings in our current age might be seriously flawed. Such identification of meanings of values and social science terms with historical paragons is in fact frequently based on distorted and embellished narratives of the past. The Athenian world, for instance, is generally not treated in terms of historical analysis, but as a mythical dimension of artificial heroes whose virtues are expected to be simply transposed into our modern times. Moreover, this mythologization of the past concerning the interpretations of desirable public life and democracy is obviously strongly linked to the question of national narratives which may reflect on recent history as well: what else is for instance the Czech obsession with the concept of the so-called Masaryk's humanist democracy of the First Czechoslovak Republic, often reflected in an image of Czechhood as a service to the truth and humanity opposed to all totalitarian and authoritarian menaces?

Nevertheless, this revelation and deconstruction of the mythological character of most seemingly scientific interpretations of political values and word meanings should not be considered as a relativist appeal which would recommend to disregard all narratives based on idealist historical examples and national evaluations of collective identity. If a more pluralist and critical perspective is applied into the schooling process – demonstrating for instance the fact the both Athenian and Czechoslovakian historical concepts of political culture and citizenship were complicated and complex phenomena replete with characteristics which from the modern perspective cannot be accepted as bearable pillars of civic education – this should not be considered as an appeal to "empty the national pantheon" through attempts to free the national narrative of any hero who may (potentially) be interpreted controversially. Quite the contrary, as one might be moved in reading *Pericles' Funeral Oration* by Thucydides or recalling Masaryk's courage in public life, one should also note the relevant relations that make the understanding of particular decisions and historical contexts clearer, i.e. one should not forget to "mind the gap" that distinguishes the dimension of our own thoughts and deeds from those of our ancient ancestors.

The exploration of such gaps is, however, a fundamental starting point for the ap-

plication of *procedural* teaching about democracy and civic culture (Davies & Gregory & Riley 1999; Weinberg & Flinders 2018). The goal is to present and understand *citizenship* not as a limited sum of eternal values and personal attributes, but more as a contextual set of behaviours that emerge and remain fully dependent on various political contents. Although the same or a similar understanding of togetherness and collective responsibility can be contemplated, we must leave the artificial and black-and-white interpretation of national (civil) heroes aside. A *good citizen* is no longer the representative of a cult of historical (mis)interpretation of flawless “robots,” but anyone who respects the basic Aristotelian concept of *polis*, i.e. a community in which all members are mutually responsible not only for each other, but for the collective as a whole. It is precisely the community that determines the individual’s liberty and equal rights as well as fosters a common mentality and identity. Preserving the rights and privileges of the individual versus ensuring that the duties and responsibilities to society are carried out is a conflict as old as civilization itself. Yet these two goals are not only not mutually exclusive, but wholly interdependent on each other.

Hence, there is no space for connecting the concept of *good citizenship* in the educational process with any kind of particular ideological, religious or moral motives. Civic education is not (or no longer) about presenting these kinds of meanings and definitions, but about understanding ongoing processes, e.g. with regard to an *overlapping consensus* that is created and maintained deliberatively (Rawls 1987). The question of who is or is not a *good citizen* thus should not be presented to students with one ultimate answer, as the assessment is based on never-ending sets of negotiations, theoretical reflections and adjusted public behaviours. As Ernst Renan famously identified the preservation of national identity with collective willingness and an imaginary *everyday plebiscite* (Renan 1939) which enables national togetherness to be permanently and regularly contested, the same can be said for the concept of *good citizenship*.

Moreover, another advantage of the *procedural* model of teaching democracy is that it fosters an ability to avoid anachronist and ideological interpretations of both historical cases as well as contemporary social issues such as the definition of the nation or preferred foreign policies. The essence of *good citizenship* is thus identified not with ideal content and the worldviews of the particular received historical and current *heroes*, but with the question of legitimate civic attitudes and behaviour as well as with willingness to consider the collective impact of one’s individual deeds. By following this line of reasoning, we can avoid situations in which cases of exaggerated collectivism, radical nationalism, xenophobic intolerance or irrational fanaticism could be labelled by students as affirmative examples of desirable civic courage from earlier times.

In addition to all of this, the *procedural* and constructivist understanding of teaching democracy provides also another advantage regarding the enhancement of *soft skills* in the educational process. Contrary to social science education as merely memorising and repeating “phone lists” and taxonomical schemes, the constructivist treatment of civic education enables the teaching of *something* even under circumstances in which the *subject of education* cannot be precisely defined since its essence lies in the per-

manently pluralist and changing character of particular connotations. Furthermore, if there is a lasting public distrust towards civic education as something obsolete or even ideologically dangerous, the interpretation of democratic schooling as the cultivation of skills instead of the mere presentation of ideas and pieces of information might be a feasible way to systematically reject the idea of social science teaching as a “Nuremberg Funnel” process. In this way, the belief can be promulgated that civic education need not be limited to the scope of specialized subjects such as humanities, but should be extended to all subjects as a matter of globalist teaching strategies. In this regard, it is reasonable to accept the idea of social science education as a game with *gross concepts* (Shapiro 2005) instead of universal meanings, as its significant aim does not reside in the linguistic purism that the teacher is expected to provide. Hence, the *procedural* concept of teaching democracy should be considered more as an allegory of a journey through a tortuous maze, not a straightforward walk down a path. Only on the condition that both the educator and the citizen-student are able to work with ever-changing concepts on the fly can *good citizenship* emerge as a living idea, not a mere textbook definition to be learned by rote.

THE POST-COMMUNIST CZECH SPECTRE OF ETHNIC NATIONALISM: A MENACE FOR CIVIC EDUCATION?

The above-mentioned embeddedness of Czech educational schemes in the positivist and substantial understanding of learning processes is, however, not the only challenge the procedural model of civic education endeavours to face. Although the fall of the communist regime in Czechoslovakia was assessed as a part of broader European triumph of universalism (Fukuyama 2006), events and political culture in Central European region in the 21st century clearly indicate that the question of collective self-identification, heterostereotypes, populism, xenophobia and illiberalism represent a very serious political and social quandary (Ágh 2015; Zakaria 1997) that both civic society as well as educational dimension should not neglect. A significant inclination of certain groups of people towards traditional ethnic concepts of national identity thus revive the older analyses made by Carl Schmitt (2000) or Harvey Mansfeld (2000), both of whom independently suggested that the harmonious cohabitation of universal liberal principles with the concept of national democracy is unsustainable on a long term basis. Whereas liberalism stands for equal individual rights for everyone irrespective of identity, the idea of democratic decision-making depends on more or less homogenous patterns of community based not only on shared interests, but on intuition of togetherness, emotional bonds and common mentality that is – in the post-communist space of Central European countries – still dominated by the concept of ethnic nationalism (Pirro 2015; Bauerová 2018). Any effort to promote the ideal of effective and reasonable liberal democracy therefore requires the abandonment of the neoliberal doctrine (Davies & Bansel 2007), which became widely accepted in Central European countries after 1989 and has faced only several challenges in the Czech context so far (Černý & Sedláčková & Tuček 2004; Rupnik 2018; Hviždala & Přibáň 2018; Hlaváček 2019). A more holistic, pluralist and constructivist concepts of collective

self-identification should therefore be introduced into the structure of civic education according to postmodern educational trends (Kaščák & Pupala 2011; Richardson 1997; Aronowitz & Giroux 2003; Beck & Kosnik 2006; Kritt 2018).

Hence, the civic education curriculum prefigures collective identification as an indispensable part of current social, political and cultural life (Ashmore & Deaux & McLaughlin-Volpe 2004) on the one hand, but it also needs to promote critical reflection on this idea based on the assumption that national identification can be read in dissimilar ways without treating ethnic categories as a priori and universally given phenomena (Kamusella 2012). Although such an approach is not a revolutionary one, since it presupposes the application of older fruitful constructivist notions about nationalism (Anderson 1983; Ram 1994; Hroch 2007; Wodak et al. 2009) as well as non-ethnic concepts of national identity in the educational process, such an application becomes difficult in the traditional post-communist Czech social discourse, which, as indicated above, has been evaluated as highly conservative, monistic and based on the ethno-nationalist belief in the cultural supremacy of “Czechhood” (Heimann 2009). Although this prevalence of ethno-nationalism is not limited only to the Czech environment and concerns the whole area of Central Europe, the fact is that such patterns of ethnic mentality had already been introduced into the narrative of Czech identity in the 19th century. The intellectual and political elite of the then Bohemian Kingdom in the framework of Austrian empire based the idea of a sovereign Czechhood on the image of the cultural clash between aggressive German and peaceful Slavonic forces, a conflict that later become a reality of an ethnically divided society (King 2018).

Such concept of Czech identity constructing the vision of national community as a “purified” homogenous society and distinguishing itself from non-Czechs on the basis of their language and ethnic bonds of presupposed affinity was assessed as victorious especially after 1945 and the expulsion of Germans. Already at that time the well-known philosopher István Bibó was criticizing such a concept as well as the homogenization of ethnic identity, pointing at the fatal loss of the Central European ability to adjust in an atmosphere of otherness (Bibó 2015). This warning can be seen as a kind of tragic prophecy, since even more than seventy years after the end of WW2, there remains a very serious problem in the Czech society with the rise of intolerance, chauvinism and dominant patterns of ethnic self-identification (Hvíždala & Přibáň 2018; Rupnik 2018; Hlaváček 2019) as well as with the lack of pluralist respect towards other nations and minorities along with the inability to treat one’s own identity in an openly civic way (Hejnal 2012; Burjanek 2001). Hence, although the old occidentalist interpretation of Eastern Europe as merely a space of dangerous, backward, zealous and obsolete forms of collective identification has been modified (Jaskulowski 2010), it is obvious that the prevalence of the closed concept of identity (Popper 2020) requires not only the reformulation of fundamental social values and the re-understanding of one’s individual identity, but also a “paradigm shift,” including reflection on the relationship between language and social reality in the process of civic education.

A CONSTRUCTIVIST AND PROCEDURAL MODEL OF *GOOD CITIZENSHIP* AND *CIVIC NATIONAL IDENTITY* IN CZECH EDUCATION: AN INNOVATIVE PROJECT BASED ON THE *AGONIST* CONCEPT OF DEMOCRACY

If there is an urgent need for the pluralist promotion of social values and collective affiliations in the Czech environment due to the still prevalent impact of the traditional narrative of ethnic nationalism, it is the right time to indicate possible ways of employing the above-mentioned desirable trends in practice. Hence, this part of the paper will introduce and analyse a specific part of the current educational project that has been evolved at the University of Hradec Králové since 2018 (Centrum pro studium demokracie a kultury 2018)¹ and which elucidates possible desirable trends in the formation of the student's understanding of democratic values as well as the relation to collective identity and concepts of postmodern virtuous citizenship according to the standards of the so-called *agonist* understanding of democracy, i.e. a paradigm that purports that stable and effective democracy should not mask or even suppress political conflicts but should help to reveal, express and manage them (Wenman 2013; Mouffe 2005).

The analysed project that was realised within the cooperation of three Czech universities (Masaryk University in Brno, Palacký University in Olomouc and University of Hradec Králové) from June 2018 till November 2021 and was co-funded by the European Union as the programme no. CZ.02.3.68/0.0/0.0/16_032/0008154 (Operační program Výzkum, vývoj a vzdělávání 2018)² aimed primarily to promote the principles of active citizenship and involvement of students in the life in democratic society by creating 12 educational programmes for teachers and students. The project worked with several particular dimensions of active citizenship such as general knowledge of civic competencies, political participation in public life, prevention of extremism, respect towards cultural differences, democratic values or media literacy and was developed by the specialized teams of Czech experts including didacticians, political scientists, historians, media scientists and lecturers. Furthermore, all the materials and project outputs were permanently consulted with the involved Czech grammar school teachers who applied and critically assessed the innovative concepts and methods in the various environments of the Czech schooling process; hence, the below analysed activities have already been tested and reformulated on the basis of three independent empirical applications to the grammar school education. Even though the project started to be realised before the social and educational impacts of the SARS-CoV-2 crisis occurred, the project teams commenced to reflect new challenges during the progress of the educational programme and thus the final educational concept treats not only with the "traditional" challenges of the Czech civic education after 1989, but endeavours to face the current social dimensions of the pandemic threat as well.

However, regarding the aforementioned problems and quandaries linked to the *sta-*

¹ The author of this study was a member of the project team at the University of Hradec Králové. For the detailed insight into the main aims, strategies and materials of the project see <https://www.obcansky-prukaz.eu/#vzdelavaci-programy>

² See <https://opvvv.msmt.cz/download/file2300.pdf>

tus quo of contemporary Czech civic education, the analysis of this particular educational project endeavours to demonstrate that any systematic application of more holistic and constructivist methods into the national educational process should begin with a definition of both the flexible and procedural delimitation of the principles of good citizenship as well as to identify the appraised outcomes as well as threats to be avoided. On the basis of such an approach, the following attributes may be put forward as the main desired outcomes of the analysed project:

– *Good citizenship* should not be treated as a sum of particular universal values but as the procedural ability of an individual human being to consider one's own life as a *communicating vessel* that is inherently linked to the life of a community bounding individuals by the principles of a social contract with the aim to achieve not only convergent but collective goods (Taylor 2003).

– The concept of *good citizenship* is not about knowledge to be tested and evaluated, but about experience and attitudes that may be trained and reflected via the simulation of the situations from the everyday public life.

– Educational training in *good citizenship* demands mechanisms of checks and balances preventing any of the actors from identifying the question of civic principles with intentionally or unwittingly promoted particular worldviews or ideological beliefs.

– The concept of *good citizenship* should therefore reflect the actor's own embeddedness in liberal discourse and a constructivist paradigm, since only on this condition one the preferred ideal of neutrality and impartiality can be accepted, not as the absence of preferences and interests or even a naïve belief in the existence of platonic values independent of social ideas and expressions about human life, but as an intentional declaration of the actor's own attitudes and behaviours that the actor is willing to change through a dialogue with competing visions.

– Civic education is also assumed to forestall any kind of relativist indications, an idea which would suggest that the acceptance of the pluralism of meanings and their dependence on particular social contexts is expected to support the *anything goes* principle instead of treating rational public debate as the optimal tool to enforce particular sets of beliefs in a more just and fair way than a mere reliance on traditional authoritarian and tautological techniques such as the universalist language of an assumed "normality".

– A postmodern understanding of *good citizenship* should therefore also endeavour to replace the traditional conception of language as a universal depiction of social reality and a sum of absolutes with a discursive understanding of terms as merely floating signifiers (Mehlman 1972) which must be permanently discussed and re-interpreted (Foucault 2002; Hanan 2015; Burtonwood 2006).

Keeping all these expected outcomes and challenges in mind, the presented educational programme is designed as a coherent complex of three specific blocks which reflect the main civic skills that the programme endeavours to enforce, i.e., Cooperation – Conflict – Compromise. The first part of the project (Cooperation) contains activities and methods which support the idea that students as members of the public community should be able to think about the limitation of individual selfish interests in favour of a discursively constructed and negotiated “common good”. Hence, this part is assumed to open and reflect especially questions such as: What does a civic society stand for? What shall I do when I cannot tolerate something that concerns not just me, but whole society? How can I promote my own ideas and opinions if my social group is just a minority and political elites continue to neglect my voice?

In contrast to this part, the second block (*Conflict*) presents the existence of dissentious situations as an irremovable part of human life, a supposition that students are supposed to accept and know how to manage. This is why especially questions of the contextual determination of human values, ideological reinterpretations and the historical background of collective memory and identity are treated here. In this case, mainly these questions are relevant: Why do people disagree with me even if I am “right”? Why people keep arguing and fighting and in some case can never agree and reconcile? Why should I defend someone who I do not agree with?

The last part of the project is then focused on the optimal methods of compromise-solution training as an indispensable skill of democratic reasoning in a pluralist society. It therefore contains specific role-playing games and simulations that facilitate the adoption of the desirable civic behaviour of the student in the roles of both citizen and politician.

Besides the above described meta-principles of *good citizenship* that the project attempts to evolve and form, individual activities also aim at the reformulation and re-conceptualization of the Czech national educational curriculum (RVP 2007), which has been criticized for its obsolescence, incoherent interpretation of values and unclarified concept of ideological embeddedness (Havlíček 2018; Květina 2016). On the basis on such an effort, the project also suggests to replace the current version of *key competencies* (KK 2008) regarding the civic education with several new expected formative outcomes that would boost the constructivist and pluralist attitudes of students in their understanding of civic reality. Such a development of civic attitudes presupposes structural support for these competencies as expected outcomes of the educational process concerning student attitudes:

- The student is able to perceive that social values and terms like “nation”, “democracy” and “freedom” are always historically, culturally or politically determined and thus need to be permanently discussed and defined.
- The student treats discussion as the optimal platform for the fabrication of social values and attitudes; the fact that the art of argumentation requires long-term training as well as ability and empathy to perceive the world through pluralist perspectives should be kept in mind.

– The student accepts pluralism as an inherent essence of social reality; therefore conflict is accepted as a natural part of human life that should not be eradicated, but managed and cultivated through rational public discussion.

– The student is aware of student’s own collective identities and is willing to think about co-responsibility for their preservation; moreover, the student also reflects upon the fact that sustainable concepts of democracy and citizenship require thought about understandings of human and society which represent alternate challenges for possessive individualism and egoism (MacPherson 2010; Thayer-Bacon 2006).

– The student understands the student’s own position in society and is well versed in the rights, options, expectations and obligations towards community that one takes part in (The student is able to suggest solutions in the case of urgent need to deal with public institutions and is aware of relations to the political system, laws and public administration).

With these aims in mind, this analysis points particularly at three materials from the above introduced project that should be considered in the enhancement of a constructivist application of socially and culturally determined understanding of values with a theoretical and philosophical justification of their conceptual framing.

ACTIVITY NO. 1: SIMULATION OF SOCIAL MEDIA CAMPAIGNS AND POLITICAL COMPETITION

The first educational activity to be presented is focused on the development of student’s awareness that the character of the public debate in the 21st century is considerably influenced by the existence of social networks as well as by the flexible nature of language meanings that competing public agents can adjust according to their particular current needs. Following the aforementioned aim to promote an alternate *agonist* concepts of democracy as a way out of the contemporary crisis of liberal democracy, the activity called “Historybook” (www.historybook.cz) also endeavours to present both political and civic conflicts over the interpretations of values as well as social interests as the non-negligible essence of the democratic public space that must be maintained, though also at the same time cultivated and criticized.

This online activity is based on innovative educational software which enables a specific application (Historybook) offering teachers an opportunity of setting up their own online classroom where student groups under the auspice of their teacher can create accounts of real historical characters, i.e. famous people from both the Czech and the world’s past such as Winston Churchill, Maria Theresa, Napoleon Bonaparte, Franz Joseph I, Catherine the Great and Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk. The task of these student groups is then to play the role of professional image makers and to administer the assigned account for the particular historical character on this fictional social network. This means that all members of such teams are assumed to look for the essential personal pieces of information that they could use in the online “political campaign“

and on their basis, they can present and share all the “news” from the characters’ private lives, post photos or pictures that they can make on their own, or even write statuses and comment on the posts of other historical personalities administered by the competing teams. With this procedure, the online classroom of various political characters can represent quite vivid and original examples of fictional historical speech, portrayals and statements that students can further analyse, interpret and comment upon with their teacher.

Furthermore, as the part of the above-presented online platform, it is also possible to organize an activity called “The Greatest Hero of All Time,” that is inspired by popular TV competitive shows in which the citizens of countries were allowed to vote for the most iconic historical person in their history. However, contrary to the serious character of such TV show concepts, this educational activity tries to demonstrate the necessity of a pluralist understanding of social values as well as an interpretation of historical characters in a discursively-based as well as amusing way. This scheme thus presupposes that all student groups will create a promotional video summing up all possible arguments as to why the particular historical hero should be awarded the title of the greatest hero of all time. Later on during a face-to-face lesson each team presents its video clip, and after which all the other teams are invited to ask questions or make objections against the particular personality whose deeds have just been advocated and promoted. Of course, the team assigned to the currently criticized historical hero is expected to defend their choice of hero with all possible rhetorical means, i.e. to prepare as many relevant counter-arguments that might come in handy. This procedure is repeated according to the final number of the “candidates” so that each team is able to present, criticize, comment, ask about and advocate individual candidates in a fair and sophisticated competition. Both presentations as well as subsequent debates are therefore supposed to demonstrate that the concept of *good citizenship* and *historical heroism* is strongly dependent on variable interpretations formed by historical contexts, diverse worldviews and political purposes.

The set of “candidates” for such competition can be understandably adjusted according to individual intentions and needs, but since the activity as a whole is constructed according to the principles of a safe environment in which students can identify themselves with real but already deceased people whose possible controversies are historical rather than currently problematic, the possible employment of well-known ancient past or even mythological characters is recommended. In the project, the example of the competition “The Greatest Hero of the Trojan War” is presented, one which enables students to choose from 4 different characters (Odysseus, Achilles, Agamemnon, Hector) and equips them with several paragons of both supporting arguments as well as counter-arguments (for instance: Was it moral when Odysseus pretended he had gone insane for not to go to war? Or to deceive his fellow-soldiers by jumping on his shield instead of Trojan soil and later trick the Trojans with the horse? Was Achilles a hero when rejected to fight due to his love disputes and thus allowed the Trojans to kill his friend Patroclus? Should the willingness of Agamemnon to sacrifice his own daughter for the sake of Greek victory be praised? Was it right when Hector killed dozens of Greeks and protect his brother although he was the one who

in fact betrayed the Greeks?)

When the teams defend their historical hero and later present their team strategies, the students are able to get deep into the main principles and techniques of ideological promotion as well as to understand the difference between the effort to capture the national past through the objectivist paradigm of science and the attempt to adjust the interpretation of particular historical narratives to specific political purposes. In this regard, the above-mentioned activity might be divided into two different stages: in the first, meant to be mostly inspiring and stimulating, students should be intrigued by the process of searching for the relevant information, having fun, and experiencing the flow phenomenon (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi 2000) by creating the most fitting and convincing profile of the assigned character. In the second stage, when the teams have already become familiar with the basic information and style of their “hero of the past,” a more sophisticated aim is to be achieved, since they are supposed to put themselves in their character’s place and identify both with his or her language as well as with the corresponding way of thinking. During both stages, however, the teacher is expected to be appropriately perceptive concerning the level of controversy and working with the fictional identification with real historical characters. Hence, students must accept that they are assumed to play the roles they want to since the activity effectively presupposes that the teams of “image makers” will not rebel against their own characters. Obviously, the whole activity as such is based on a very light-hearted concept of learning and any efforts of students to implement irony, sarcasm or even revolt should be didactically reflected in a relaxed way and atmosphere.

After both the presentation of particular social network profiles and the competition between “historical heroes,” the analysis of all the differences between the selected characters and intentional misinterpretations is recommended. Such analysis is designed to identify how the usage of particular historical events and people characters can be adjusted according to the intentional misinterpretations and purpose-built motivations, and thus also to demonstrate that the understanding of past events cannot be fully universal since it first requires the identification of particular worldviews, narratives and political or, rather, pragmatic intentions. Keeping a constructivist approach in mind, the whole of this activity is able to combine three distinctive dimensions of teaching about social values and identity: first, it clearly shows how these phenomena are culturally and historically formed and thus dependent on variable contexts; secondly, it demonstrates the pros and cons of promoting public behaviour on social networks in a safe fictional environment of characters from the past, one in which the danger of the politicisation of current ideological clashes between real political agents is minimised; and thirdly, it uses amusing and relaxed approaches towards knowledge with a focus on finding and sorting out relevant information.

ACTIVITY NO. 2: HOW IS IT POSSIBLE TO “TRAIN” MANIPULATION AS AN INHERENT PART OF CITIZENSHIP?

The second activity has the goal to present manipulative behaviour as an essential at-

tribute of so-called instrumental rationality (Spracklen 2009), which is part of everyday social life and public sphere based on individualist concept of society. Contrary to the image of manipulation as something inherently evil, the activity tries to suggest that behaviour adjusting strategies according to one's goals and needs and persuading others with regard to mutual benefits should be considered as an important trait of social interaction that every human being is capable of and needs to understand. Similarly to the first activity analysed above, this concept works with the pluralist character of social reality as well as the need for a critical and contextual understanding of human behaviour, since there is no universal definition of acceptable (i.e. non-manipulative) and unacceptable (i.e. manipulative) social behaviour possible, as any such delimitation requires the knowledge of the particular context in which the given behaviour is applied.

For this purpose, students are expected to watch five different passages from various well-known movies (both Czech and non-Czech) without being aware what the assumed common point of all these excerpts they will observe and analyse is. Nonetheless, as has been suggested, all the passages are focused on the more or less typical social situations in which instrumental rationality and manipulative techniques in the social communication and negotiation are used. The activity therefore includes these passages:

1. "The roof scene" from the movie *The Shawshank Redemption* (Darabont 1994) in which the main character Andy Dufresne manages to persuade the chief warder to carry out a mutually beneficial though illegal transaction;
2. "The removal of the chancellor scene" from the first episode of *Star Wars* (Lucas 1999), in which Queen Amidala initiates the process of removing the current chancellor and thus unwittingly brings the dark side to power;
3. "The restarting of the reactor scene" from the series *Chernobyl* (Renck 2019) in which the shift manager blackmails his subordinates;
- 4) "The trial scene" from the movie *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* (Yates 2007) in which Albus Dumbledore convinces the wizard jury not to sentence Harry for his law-breaking;
5. "The meeting of the board scene" from the Czech comedy *My Sweet Little Village* (Menzel 1985) in which the chief of the collective farm pleads for the transfer of the mentally challenged employee to another company.

The main task of the students during the watching process is to identify and distinguish the positive and negative characters in the presented storylines according to their own perceptions, feelings and opinions; however, they are supposed to support and defend their decisions with the help of rational argumentation. Furthermore, they are also asked to find any possible common issue which is typical of all the movie excerpts and which concerns the question of human behaviour. After the successful presentation of all passages, the students debate the possible moral and immoral

behaviour in each scene and try to persuade their classmates about their interpretation; the situation is intentionally complicated by various depths of each individual student's knowledge of each movie, which raises the significant question of whether of one should be allowed (or is even able) to assess particular human behaviour and character without knowing the broader context and the whole storyline of the character's social life. Hence, this analytical and interpretative part of the activity aims mainly at an effort to demonstrate that:

- it is not possible to draw a clear cut line between absolutely “good” and absolutely “evil” situations without taking various human motivations into account and without applying the perspective of different social agents involved in the situations
- the contextual understanding of each situation requires knowing not only the situation itself, but also the more global image of the issue including its past (causes) as well as long-term impacts and social evaluation
- the assessment of a certain behaviour depends on different worldviews, cultural backgrounds and personal interests
- manipulative techniques which can be identified in all the presented excerpts are not related only to the characters evaluated as generally bad, since an effort to use the opportunity to persuade the others about one's own values, beliefs and interests cannot be ignored in real social life and thus should be treated as reflected kind of behaviour the permissibility or quite the contrary inadmissibility of which depends on different factors than on the manipulative character of the negotiation itself.

To conclude and depict the main goal of this activity in general, it is set to enhance a desirable understanding of social values and deeds as factors which cannot be judged once and for all and which also requires the taking of historical, cultural as well as minority points of view into account.

ACTIVITY NO. 3: LIBERTY IN A CIVIC DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY

The last activity analysed in this study deals with the concept of freedom as one of the cornerstones of both civic education and the public arena in general. The exercise attempts to demonstrate possible answers to questions such as: “What are acceptable, desirable or even necessary limits to individual freedom?”; “What does it mean to be free in our everyday lives?” and “In what ways can freedom and supporting the principle of strong social authority be reconciled?”

Since the value of freedom may be identified as one of the most frequently mentioned attributes of liberal democratic society, this activity tries to present *being free* not as a dogmatic and uncritical truth only to be passively accepted without reasoning and deliberation, but as a very complicated and often even controversial concept, the validity and relevance of which must be perpetually contested and evaluated accord-

ing to varying circumstances and perspectives of the use of the term. In this activity, students should consider this most cherished value in terms of various contexts. Learners should be also able to explore their ability to express and exemplify ways in which individual rights can be considered as a cornerstone of postmodern pluralist and tolerant societies.

Although the design of this project had already begun before the measures instituted by governments in last two years in response to SARS-CoV-2, it must be added that the conceptual understanding of freedom might be very useful for an educational interpretation of the institutional responses to the crisis. Many serious tensions and cleavages have occurred or have been deepened since measures were first instituted, following which guidelines were routinely changed and extended. In this regard, the student's ability to distinguish between various interpretations of freedom should facilitate a deeper understanding of both the measures instituted as well as the foundations of the authority of the bodies and individuals who are making these decisions. In dealing with complicated arguments as to the best possible solutions to foster public health, it is only on the condition that students are aware of various definitions and perspectives with regard to measures taken that they can participate in the relevant conversations necessary in free societies. In understanding how to describe one's own state as *being free* as well as how to apply diverse understandings of freedom to real everyday situations, students are also empowered to more readily avoid yielding to short-sighted narrow ideological perspectives. In the case of governmental and other institutional responses to SARS-CoV-2, conflicts in interpretation are often framed in terms of the binary of "rational democrats" attempting to preserve human freedom against "foolish authoritarians" attempting to use the situation to seize totalitarian power.

Is any government allowed to order the obligatory vaccination for all citizens? And if so, can such government still be assessed as a liberal democratic one? Should the mandates on wearing face masks in public and some private spaces be seen as an expression of collective communitarianism, or rather a depersonalising limitation of freedom? Which arguments can be deployed in debates with regard to compulsion, compliance and freedom? What is the role of empirical scientific evidence and debate, and how should these expert discussions, often contentious, be presented to the public? These are precisely the kind of questions that teachers are recommended to pose as a part of the ice-breaking and motivation process before a given activity is begun.

Obviously these kinds of issues extend beyond SARS-CoV-2, but the responses to this putative crisis can prove a useful example. Multivalent interpretations of the notion of liberty concern questions of human nature, specific historical issues and, most relevant today, technology, along with how all of these discourses intersect. The teacher thus can raise questions such as: "Would I be freer, if my society allowed me to steal and to kill others—for instance as is often the case during war? How could the Jacobins in revolutionary France present arguments based on *liberté, égalité, fraternité* as they massacred masses of people who did not agree with them? Would I be still free, if I decided to merge my body and mind with a computer, e.g. as a part of a global cloud hive mind" (Matwyszyn 2019)?

To bring such questions into a constructivist schooling process, it is necessary to abandon the traditional concept of freedom as universal value of all individual human beings independent of particular time periods and cultural understandings (Cruz 2021). Contrary to more or less traditionalist concepts like these, the activities exemplified here endeavour to explore liberty as multi-layered value that should not be interpreted merely within an over-individualist framework as a right to do anything one wants, but as a historically determined balance between total arbitrariness and oppression. As suggested in the example above of the SARS-CoV-2 discussion, the project aims among other goals at exploring ways to introduce and discuss acute dilemmas, e.g. how to teach about freedom of speech and the behaviour of each individual as indispensable human values without delimiting freedom in terms of its dependence on specific social and cultural backgrounds in dialogue with the actor's own perspective.

These activities themselves are therefore composed of simulations of a number of social situations (both potentially real as well as hypothetical ones), each of which represents an elementary quandary of one particular human being whose individual decision-making and behaviour might be challenged at a given moment. Students are then expected to debate and decide on whether they would assess particular situations which support or limit freedom. Following such reasoning and assessments, learners are also invited to realize that instead of a typical understanding of freedom as “my right to do or not do something,” the additional consideration of “what defines freedom, for whom and under which circumstances” should always be taken into account.

For this reason, the exercises are based mostly on the conceptual scheme of Berlin's dichotomy between the negative and positive notions of liberty (Berlin 1969). Although this model has been criticized and might be thus assessed as already outmoded in current political theory (Skinner 1998; Pettit 1999), the research team has based the activities on this easy-to-understand binary of positive and negative freedom. In this way, students may be introduced to ways of thinking about freedom as something undebatable and unproblematic, leading to constructivist and procedural discussions about liberal values.

Groups of students are gradually confronted with several dilemmas in a worksheet, with these predicaments described in written form, symbolically depicted in pictures and labelled as A–H. A variety of cases are presented from various historical periods and cultural backgrounds to demonstrate that although the question of liberty is omnipresent and crosses through times and places, interpretations are dependent on a precise particular context. The teams of students then analyse all the situations and formulate their own arguments as to whether the particular people in the given situations (A–H) should be considered as free agents or not:

- A. What if a slave got permission from his slave master to do whatever they wanted for one day – would such a slave be free?
- B. What if I am a drug addict and decide to take another dose – am I free?
- C. Am I still free if a policeman forces me to pay a fine for speeding?

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- D. What if parents do not let their child to go to a party – is the child free?
- E. Am I free if my employer makes me redundant?
- F. What if the government ordered a minority population to leave their homes – would these people be free? (Jews during the Nazi Regime can be used as an example.)
- G. What if a girl left her university studies to take care of her married lover's needs – would she have decided freely?
- H. What if I were to be executed for reading a banned book – would I die as a free person? (a political text, pornography)
- I. If I am a woman suffering from the violence of my husband / partner and still do not want to leave him – am I free?

Initial indications show that the empirical application of the worksheet in the Czech educational process has proved the anticipated goals to be achievable. Based on the experiences of the research team with this methodology up to now, several significant differences in interpretations of liberty might occur in the case of each presented simulated moment. As has been suggested, the teaching material enables the framing of all presented answers within the framework of Berlin's dichotomy, although it should be recognized that the message of this activity is not a demonstration of the theory of negative and positive freedom as such. The main goal is the development of the ability of students to think about the most frequently used social values in an interpretative way. From this perspective, the situation of the slave (A) is often read as being both free and unfree at the same time, because the slave is able to do anything one wants for one day, but this possibility is contingent on the will of the slave master. The students are therefore able to deduce a significant conclusion from this finding: that the question of freedom might be strongly dependent on the socio-political system, since if slavery was now legal again, can even slaves be considered to behave freely when they are out of their master's control? Another observation was made by students in the case of the drug addict (B) who is not forced to take a dose and in that respect remains free, but many students were troubled by the idea that it is not "the real him," but it is his physical addiction that "decides" as the controlling factor.

The fact that an individual level of freedom must be always framed within a social context that in several ways determines which social behaviour is assessed as legitimate or completely unacceptable becomes more complicated in the case of the punished driver (C) and the controlled child (D). Both of these examples refer to a situation in which a concept of liberty that at first glance might seem universal must be defined politically via the traditional and current social consensus, thus students are incentivized to consider the relation between one's freedom and social expectations (i.e. what is the divisive border between non-acceptable forms of the suppression of one's individuality, and on other hand putatively desirable violent collective attitudes and behaviours necessary to maintain the stability of a social community?).

In the situations F and H featuring the example of a discriminated minority and a

reader who was put to death for reading forbidden books, these cases raise the question of the coherence between (more or less) democratic decision-making processes based on the idea of popular majoritarianism (i.e. conformist) will as opposed to the values of liberal individualism. In both cases students should discuss whether the application of the will of the majority can be compatible with keeping all people free. Berlin's concept of positive and negative liberty as a fundamental theoretical framework is a straight-forward way of introducing this activity. It is exactly cases like those represented in F and H which could lead to a debate over more holistic, collectivist and (in Berlin's scheme also) positive forms of freedom. In evaluating a situation in which the actor is allowed to take part in decision-making and is aware of the consequences of a certain behaviour, students frequently come to the conclusion that any final decision – no matter how cruel – can be assessed as democratic and free, especially when it is related to Rousseau's famous concept of democracy as "forced freedom" (Rousseau 1999: 58).

Besides this collective and political dimension of liberty, the worksheet also features other cases that take the question of the actor's mental capacities and thus the principle of rational agency into consideration. Such reasoning about the dependence of freedom on individual rationality with regard to the limits of rational behaviour is featured in the case of drug addict (B), as the physiological dependence on a drug is generally evaluated as an argument against the possibility of evaluating such a human being as completely free. Similar cases of this inherent tension in the interpretation of freedom can be thus found in the case of examples G and I, i.e., cases of women in an abusive or detrimental relationship. Both these women can be in fact assessed as fully free agents who completely control their decision-making processes, since there is neither an external nor internal violent obstacle preventing them from taking responsibility for their decisions and that could thus be described as a symptom of "enslavement." Nevertheless, even in these cases the fact that the decisions of such agents (to leave university studies or not to leave a violent partner) can be considered as risky or at least with the possibility of pernicious consequences. Thus a conclusion that neither of these women are actually free might be supportable, since they both could be perceived as victims of the dominant symbols and cultural interpretations that historically assigns received kinds of behaviour to certain genders.

We hope that such a wide range of the cases to be analysed and interpreted would ensure the pluralist character of the expected reasoning and subsequent debate. It is precisely these methods of critical thinking and the ability of the application of theoretical knowledge to social situations which contributes to the reinterpretation of social values as not stemming exclusively from universal categories, but can also be framed in terms of discourse-based phenomena that can, and in fact must be continuously discussed and deliberated.

CONCLUSION

On the basis of the reflection of significant contemporary challenges regarding the process of civic education in the framework of the Czech schooling system, several

quandaries have been identified. The systematic analyses of and procedural resolutions regarding these issues should be facilitated to acclimate the current form of Czech civic education to the standards of pluralist and postmodern discourse in the 21st century.

As the main dilemmas representing the above mentioned challenges, the most significant issues to be introduced and analysed are the following:

- the orientation of the educational process as centred on a factual-based and substantial understanding of social science terms in the national curriculum which anticipates either theoretical or encyclopaedic knowledge and treats political science merely as a field of universally defined categories
- the poor public image of the importance of social sciences and civic education caused mainly by the presupposed explicitly ideological and undiscerning character of their application in the schooling process
- the dominant ethnic understanding of national identity (as well as other kinds of collective phenomena) both in educational and broader public discourse as stemming from the complicated interpretations and complexes of the past of the Central European region as well as on traditional historical patterns of Czech national narrative

In the second part of the study, this paper endeavours to suggest possible ways to face the aforementioned challenges and dilemmas by presenting and analysing a quite recent – and in the framework of Czech national education, quite unique – schooling programme that has been created as the outcome of an EU project with the cooperation of didacticians, elementary and grammar schools teachers, as well as academicians from the University of Hradec Králové. This programme has been analysed both theoretically and empirically. First, the meta-cognitive background and educational ambitions regarding the philosophical dimension of civic education were identified, with several concrete examples of its educational activities presented in the next part of this section. Concerning the educational goals, it has been highlighted that the programme manages to work within a more pluralist and constructivist dimension of teaching civic education, as it is strongly focused on a reflected, embedded and systematic concept of *good citizenship*, a deliberative and interpretative understanding of language, critical reasoning and argumentation, a conflictual and *agonist* concept of democratic culture, discourse-based meanings of collective identities as well as the procedural treatment of both the democratic process and civic education. Regarding the particular educational content of this programme, the study clearly demonstrates how the project tackles very crucial as well as delicate issues such as manipulative behaviour, the impact of social networks along with historical narratives in the public space as well as elementary tensions between individual and collective forms of freedom which are both analysed separately and framed by the concept of *good citizenship* in terms of irremovable dilemmas of civic life in the 21st century.

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