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An analysis of adolescents' attitudes and opinions: the pre-conditions for effective education for citizenship

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At the third CiCe Conference in Brugge (Vacek 2001) we reported on the results of a survey investigating the opinions and attitudes of Czech adolescents towards the prospective entry of the Czech Republic into the European Union, their evaluation of other European countries and their own nation, their position on the issue of immigrants, minorities and radical racist movements and their views on the possibilities of expressing their own opinions within their significant social groups - family and school. That paper presented primarily brief commentaries on single quantified data; we have now carried out more detailed quantified analysis of the responses to discover the reasons for, and motives affecting, their opinions. The data were collected at the beginning of 2001, using a questionnaire. 170 respondents participated (93 female, 77 male, with an average age of 17.4 years). The opinions and attitudes of the respondents have also been compared with results from other projects.

Of the respondents 41.1% see entry to the EU positively and 21.2% negatively. We were interested in shifts of opinions in this field, and found that as the integration into the EU draws closer there are more negative attitudes (including those of young people). This was also observed in other research in which we compared the opinions and attitudes of young Czechs with young French people. In that study was of 600 French and 200 Czech respondents: 78.8% of the Czech respondents described themselves as primarily Czech as, while 36% of the French respondents thought of themselves as primarily French. Only 6% of the Czechs felt European, compared to 21% of the French.

With regard to a question about respondents' relation to their country and feelings of national pride, 85.1% of respondents (n=168) were proud to belong to the Czech nation, 38.1% were very proud and 47% proud. No significant differences between sexes were found, although males (76.4%, n=75) appeared a little bit more reserved, while females (92.4%, n=93) were more open. However, there was a marked difference in those recording a neutral attitude - 19.7% of males compared with 5.4% of females.

Of 168 respondents, 120 commented on their attitudes. The most frequent comments were: "I love my country", "I am a patriot", "I'm proud to be Czech" and "Although we are such a small country, we are able to win recognition and excel". The respondents frequently cited success in sport and significant history and reasons for pride, but were far more critical towards current social, and particularly political, situations.

We obtained some interesting answers to the question "What country would you not like to live in?" Of the 168 respondents, 64 placed Russia first, 45 selected Germany and 27 the Ukraine. Remember that the average age was 17.4. What reasons were given for the selection of Russia and Germany? The reasons for selecting Russia seemed to be rational: lack of political stability, low living standards, higher incidence of crime and a difficult climate ("it is cold"). However, respondents supported their negative attitudes towards Germany by stating that they did not like the German language, or asserting that the Germans "behave as if they owned our country" and "they are arrogant", or "they are just unpleasant". About ten per cent of the explanations had a background in history and in

World War II. It is interesting that in the case of Russia “historical injustice” was not mentioned (e.g. the occupation of Czechoslovakia in 1968). There is no simple explanation, but it may be that such attitudes are formed by other means than through personal experience (school, family, media, etc.).

It is our belief that this is not only a problem for the Czech Republic, but of the whole of Europe. We suggest that it is time to revise the teaching of modern history in schools: presenting the history of nations based on nationally biased interpretations to young people is both widespread and ill-fated. Furthermore – and this is obviously an appeal made in vain – political representatives of individual countries should behave more responsibly. Adolescents are not political scientists or historians; they do not encounter politics regularly and their opinions and attitudes can be influenced far more easily than those of adults by simplified poll populism and nationalistic slogans. Narrow political and economic interests interpreted in media often directly counter our efforts as teachers to educate responsible citizens who are aware of both their national and their European identity.

We carried out a detailed qualitative analysis of the opinions of Czech adolescents regarding their attitudes to the growing number of immigrants in the Czech Republic. Of the total (n=166), 45.8% saw the inflow negatively or very negatively and only 7.8% thought the immigrants enriched the culture and social life of the Czech Republic. According to respondents, the immigration negatives derived from the risk of increased unemployment (“there are not jobs for our people”), increased criminality (“foreign Mafia”), fears of diseases, drugs, etc. Xenophobia appeared only infrequently in fears of the suppression of Czech culture by foreigners, comments about interbreeding, etc. We suggest that the media plays the major role in creating the negative view of immigrants. Negative images prevail: on illegal employees from the Ukraine (who are the employers?), on the criminality of various groups and gangs, etc. The greater number of immigrants who affect Czech life positively is rarely shown, and as a result, all immigrants are seen in the same, negative, light.

Although Czech society is nationally, ethnically and religiously homogenous, we were interested in how the young Czechs viewed minorities. The task was to indicate the degree of sympathy felt towards various groups using numbers from 1 to 5 (from 1 = great sympathy, to 5 = considering it very unpleasant). We obtained following results: the Slovaks 1.96, the Americans 2.45, the Jews 2.65, the Poles 2.72, the Vietnamese 3.40, the Ukrainians 3.77, the Gypsies 3.90. Of 93 female respondents, 54 commented on their relation to minorities. Of that number, 14 (25.9%) expressed very hostile attitude (particularly towards the Roma minority), which fully corresponds with negative prejudice reported elsewhere (Gocsál, 2000). Males were less hostile towards this community.

We asked respondents whether they would object to their partner having a different religion, race or nationality. Respondents selected from the following options: 1 = do not mind at all, 2 = do not mind, 3 = a bit concerned, and 4 = very unhappy about it.

Table 1 Attitude towards eventual differences in partner's race, nationality and religion

	Total /164/	Male /73/	Female /91/
the Slovaks	1.41	1.31	1.50
the Americans	1.63	1.57	1.69
the Poles	2.09	2.00	2.18
the Germans	2.21	2.09	2.31
Black people	2.21	2.23	2.19
the Jews	2.28	2.26	2.30
the Russians	2.48	2.20	2.75
the Japanese	2.65	2.35	2.96
the Vietnamese	2.98	2.73	3.22
the Muslims	3.17	2.99	3.35
the Gypsies	3.26	3.17	3.33
the Jehovahists	3.55	3.55	3.55

These results correspond closely with the attitudes expressed towards minorities, although the categories were not identical. Czech society is characteristic for its high and historically traditional degree of secularisation. We are generally suspicious of churches and religions (in contrast to the religiously and Catholic-oriented Poland, for example) and this is particularly true of our attitudes to religious sects. Table 1 shows a comparatively favourable response to Black people as opposed to those from Asia. The negative attitude to the Roma minority appears again, while with regard to religion, the most acceptable potential partners seem to be the Jews.

A more detailed analysis revealed a strong distinction between the very critical attitude of females and attitudes expressed by males. Females showed the same (1 for the Jehovahists) or a more indulgent attitude (2 each for Black people and the Japanese) in only three cases compared with males. The biggest difference between the sexes appeared with the Russians (0.55), the Vietnamese (0.49), the Japanese (0.39) and the Muslims (0.36).

Of 164 respondents, 106 commented on their choices (46 male and 60 female). About one fourth of comments indicated tolerance towards individuals of any difference. ("It's the person, not race, nationality, language or religion, that matters..."). The Jehovahists and the Roma, and in case of females the Muslims, were rejected most strongly. Besides dogmatic and casual rejections (females stated "I don't like their looks", males did not make similar comments), both males and females considered seriously the language and religious complications in shared families (bringing up children). In this context, a number of respondents (especially female) considered it unacceptable to be forced by their partner to embrace a "different religion".

In relation to skinheads and the racist and nationalist movement, our adolescents (n=170; male = 77, female = 83) demonstrated negative and extremely negative attitudes (59% of respondents, 76.4% of the males and 47.8% of the females), in contrast to 11.3% (11.8% of male, 11.1% of females) who saw the movement as "partly positive". No one marked it as totally positive. The above "partly positive" attitude was most frequently based on the opinion that: "they (skinheads) are right about some aspects".

A more detailed analysis showed us interesting differences between male and female attitudes, particularly in two respects. 48.7% of males expressed a very negative attitude, but only 25.6% of females. A neutral attitude was reported by 41.1% of females but only

15.8% of males. To understand these significant differences, we looked at the commentaries on individual choices. Of 170 respondents, 131 commented on their attitudes. While females were usually more emotional, the situation regarding skinheads was quite the opposite. Males were unflattering about skinheads (fools, idiots, thick as bricks, etc.), considering their behaviour foolish, “without common sense”, racist and fascist. It was often emphasised that most skinheads don't know why they support the movement, don't know the historical background, etc. It would help if they had “work to do and less time to mess about” but very few expressed the opinion that the “idea of a nation and national state is dead”. Both males and females disagreed with racist violence and agreed that skinheads' ideas were senseless. Nevertheless, females were far more tolerant towards the movement: “let everyone do what he/she likes” or “it's everyone's right to do what he/she likes”. In five cases females showed open sympathy towards skinheads (“I know them, they are good friends”).

An explanation for these differences between males and females might be that skinheads are predominantly male, and it may be that males feel greater motivation and need to think about their activities and to take an attitude towards them. It is also possible that males can see themselves as a more possible target for skinheads' violence and so are more negative towards them. The neutrality or tolerance of the females may indicate that they are not as familiar as their male counterparts with the subject, or that there is lack of information on questions of racism, xenophobia, etc. at school to influence their attitudes.

A comparative analysis of those who sympathised with skinheads, expressed hostility towards immigrants and minorities, and also demonstrated a strongly nationalist patriotism revealed ten respondents (six female and four male) who could be categorised as persons with consistent xenophobic, racist and strongly nationalistic attitudes.

The last item in the questionnaire on which we will comment focused on how Czech adolescents evaluated the space to express their opinions given to them by parents and schools. Of 169 respondents, 65.7% could express their views freely at home, and only 5.3% reported problems of any kind. However, the situation was more complicated at school. Only 11.2% thought they could freely express their opinions, and 56.8% felt they could do so sometimes. On the other hand, 24.3% had the opportunity rarely and 7.7% never. So, based on their subjective views, 32.0% of adolescents felt they did not have an opportunity (space) to freely express their opinions.

This item was commented on least frequently (by only 93 respondents); most comments were positive. Respondents took it for granted that they could express themselves freely in a democratic society. However, one-third of respondents saw school as non-democratic. Some answers indicated that it is advantageous to be careful at school - “honesty doesn't pay”), “You had better not discuss too much”, “teachers don't want to hear the truth”, “teachers don't care of us...” etc.

It seems there is a disproportion between the more democratic (liberal) environment in family and school. We consider this as a significant driving element that should push teachers and schools towards dialogue with their pupils, so that schools will gradually become more and more democratic (Vacek, 2000).

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