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Establishing Media Education in the Czech Republic Against the Background of the European Concept of Media Literacy

ABSTRACT

An important aim of the current system of formal and informal education and upbringing in a democratic environment is the strengthening of media literacy, or the integration of media topics and elements of media education into educational and upbringing processes. The accession of the Czech Republic to the EU in 2004 brought new impulses for the development of media education and its implementation in the educational system. The article offers a description and analysis of the concept of media education in the Czech Republic in the European context. The text focuses on the analysis of the implementation of media education in the Czech Republic after 2004, and attempts to identify and interpret the legislative, socio-cultural and political factors that have influenced the formation of media education in the Czech environment in relation to European standards and recommendations. The research reveals an ambivalent trajectory of media education development, showing convergence with European standards while maintaining specific features reflecting local historical experience with censorship. Despite formal adoption of EU frameworks, empirical data indicate significant gaps in practical implementation, with many schools failing to adequately incorporate media education. The study also examines the relationship between media literacy and active citizenship.

KEY WORDS

Educational Policy. European Standards. Educational System. European Union. Media Education. Media Literacy.

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1 Introduction

The idea that the media can – even should – be part of the general education of the citizens of a democratic state has been taking shape in the Czech society during most of the 20th and 21st centuries, first in terms of public education, and later in considerations of incorporating media topics into the educational system. With the political and social changes after 1989 and especially after the Czech Republic's accession to European Union (EU) in 2004, these considerations have been significantly updated – especially under the influence of the experience with the introduction of media education in Western Europe. The concepts of media education are neither uniform nor static – changing under the influence of changing communications. In particular, the development of digital media has considerably blurred the notions of the contours and concept of media literacy, and thus the content of media education, see, e.g., Livingstone (2004), RobbGrieco & Hobbs (2013). The documents on media education adopted at the European level can be seen as an attempt to provide a unifying frame. In the present paper, based on the analysis of the changes in the legislative framework and basic educational documentation, we will try to explain how the Czech approach to media education coincides with the European concept, and how it is specifically local.

We understand media literacy as a set of knowledge and skills needed to navigate the media environment and to be able to critically evaluate media content (Buckingham, 2003), and to use media for pro-social self-actualization. Media education is understood as a systematic and targeted process of media literacy development implemented primarily within formal education (Jirák & Wolák, 2007).

2 Methodology

The fundamental frame of our approach is the understanding of media literacy as mentioned above, and of media education, all as forms of strengthening the level of media literacy – in our case with an emphasis on the media education in elementary schools. The aim will be to find out which key circumstances have contributed to the formation of the content and position of media education in the Czech Republic in the context of European education policy after 2004.

The ways of defining and conceptualizing media literacy have grown over time into a very broad and varied field – the British sociologist Sonja Livingstone summarizes the approaches into the general formulation that it is “the ability to access, analyse, evaluate and create messages across a variety of contexts” (Livingstone, 2004, p. 3). In this formulation, the key span of media education is from analytical, critical (and protective) skills and knowledge to creative, user skills. Between these critical and the creative poles all discussions take place, and authors differ mainly in the extent to which they lean towards one or the other and the extent to which they try to balance them. James W. Potter, for example, emphasizes the critical-analytical (protective) pole and sees media literacy primarily as the ability to interpret (mass) mediated messages (Potter, 2013; for an overview of approaches to media literacy see Šťastná, 2021, especially ch. 1).

For the purposes of this study, an analysis of legislative documents, educational programs and professional studies related to media education in both the Czech Republic and the EU was conducted. Documents from the period 2004 – 2019 were examined, depicting the development of media education after the Czech Republic's accession to the EU. Furthermore, the results of research on media literacy in the Czech Republic and their comparison with European standards were analysed.

The preliminary survey of a sample of Czech teachers revealed some kind of “clash” between formal compliance with European standards and slow and inconsistent implementation of media education. The “clash” is a main point of interest of the analysis presented here. Convergence with European standards was operationalized and measured through a qualitative analysis of legislative

and conceptual documents. Practical implementation was measured and analysed through a secondary analysis of relevant reports of research studies (Czech School Inspectorate, STEM/MARK) and international comparative indexes (Media Literacy Index), which provided evidence of the actual level of media literacy. The methodological approach fit within the framework of “process of qualitative document analysis” as designed by Altheide (1996).

3 Results

3.1 European Concept of Media Education

Media education in the European context in the 1990s and after 2000 has shifted from a fragmented approach to a systematic and integrated educational field. As stated in the final report of “Study on Assessment Criteria for Media Literacy Levels” prepared for the European Commission, in the last decade, countries such as Finland, Slovenia, France and Spain have integrated media (and digital) skills in general education curricula. France and Spain have linked these competences to civic education. According to Tornero the current trend is towards linking digital media skills with a critical approach to traditional mass media usage and content. Media literacy is a more complex concept involving the development of critical thinking and the ability to create meaning in the context of the information society (European Union, 2008).

Describing Current trends of media literacy in Europe, Pérez Cervi, Paredes and Tornero mentioned the cooperation with media industries: publishers implementing programmes to introduce print media into schools to build a readership and develop critical thinking in young people, or partnerships between educational institutions and media companies. Public service television contributes to media literacy with special programmes analysing advertising and the principles of news production. In France, Italy, the United Kingdom (UK) and Spain, there are television and radio programmes focusing on media content, which encourage discussion and analysis of media messages, thereby allowing European broadcasting regulators to gain a more important role in media literacy. Cervi, Pérez and Tornero consider it essential that promotion of media literacy should be the responsibility of public service media and regulators. They stress that media literacy is key to the ability to make informed decisions, to understand the nature of media content and to use new communication technologies effectively (Pérez Cervi et al., 2010).

As the same final report states, some curricula are promoting the convergence of media education and digital literacy (UK, Spain, France, Italy and Portugal). In some countries, such as Germany and Finland, the promotion of digital literacy is extended to general communication (European Union, 2008).

3.2 The Relationship between Media Education and Active Citizenship

The importance of media literacy in European countries is often linked with so-called active citizenship. The concept of active citizenship is undergoing a significant transformation in modern democracies. While some researchers see declining voter turnout and lower citizen participation in political parties as a problem of modern democracy, others, including Dalton & Kuechler (1990), Kaase & Newton (1995), McAdam et al. (1996) and Norris (1999), argue that traditional forms of political participation are not in decline but are being complemented by new forms of civic engagement. Media literacy plays a crucial role in this context, as illustrated by our comparison of the results of the Media Literacy Index 2023 with the level of political participation of citizens. Finland, Norway and Sweden show the best results in terms of media literacy levels (ranked 1st, 3rd and 5th out of 41 countries in the index). The Western European countries follow them,

while the Mediterranean and post-communist countries reach significantly lower levels of media literacy (Lessenski, 2023). The comparison suggests that there is some correlation between the level of political participation and the level of media literacy.

3.3 Media Education in the Czech Republic before EU Accession

In the countries that emerged from the sphere of influence of the Soviet Union after 1989 (and largely also in the countries that were part of the former USSR), media literacy became one of the themes of the modernization of general education (Jiráček & Šťastná, 2012). Not only the quality of the education system played a role in the implementation of media education, but especially the willingness of the political representation to perceive education and schooling as an important priority of the democratization process and to adjust decision-making and further planning accordingly. In the immediate post-1989 period, education and schooling were not at the top of political priorities. According to Walterová and Greger (2006), education and schooling in the V4 countries before the social transformation played only a limited role in economic and social development, did not mean much in political positions, and was mainly assessed for its cultural value.

The first efforts to introduce media education appeared in the mid-1990s. The implementation of media education was significantly influenced by the historical experience of censorship and unfree speech (Holasová, 2004). In practice, media education was implemented mainly through the production of school magazines and television, where pupils acquired media literacy through the method of “learning by doing” (Kohout, 2010).

After gaining EU candidate status in 1997, the Czech Republic began to adapt its education system to European standards – which also affected the status of media education. The project Preparation of the Concept – of Media Education in Czech Schools (1998), implemented by the Centre for Media Studies at Charles University, was crucial (The leaders of the project were Jan Jiráček, member the Centre for Media Studies at Charles University, and Pavel Kuchař, a secondary school teacher). In 2000, at the Lisbon Summit, the Council of the EU officially emphasized the importance of media literacy, and in the same year media education was introduced as a cross-cutting theme in Czech education. The key document became the White Book (Kotásek et al., 2001), the first curriculum document in the Czech Republic to mention media education.

3.4 Media Education in the Czech Republic after EU Accession

The accession of the Czech Republic to the EU in 2004 significantly influenced the development of media education through European directives and recommendations. In the same year, the Framework Education Programme (FEP) was introduced, which represented a major reform of Czech education. Media education became a compulsory cross-curriculum subject in 2006, when the school reform came into force (*Zákon č. 561/2004 Sb. Školský zákon*, 2004; *Zákon č. 563/2004 Sb. o pedagogických pracovnících*, 2004). A significant development was the project Understanding the Media funded by the European Social Fund. Its main output was the first comprehensive instruction book for teachers of media education (Mičienka & Jiráček, 2007). The material also included digital multimedia with demonstrative examples of various types of media content and the implementation of a series of workshops for teachers of the Ministry of Interior (MV ČR) in all regions of the Czech Republic. The project received the support of major institutions, including the Centre for Media Studies and national television stations. Between 2004 and 2014, about 15 – 20 major documents were published at EU level directly related to media literacy (*Doporučení Evropského parlamentu...*, 2006; *Directive 2007/65/EC...*, 2007; European Commission, 2007; European Parliament, 2008; *Commission recommendation...*, 2009; CECS, n.d.).

This number includes directives, recommendations, resolutions and major studies. In addition to these main documents, there are a number of sub-reports, studies and recommendations at national level in individual member states.

In the European context, a Media Literacy Expert Group was established in 2006 to serve as an advisory body to the European Commission (Silver, 2009). In 2009 – 2010, EU media literacy surveys were conducted (Celot & Pérez Tornero, 2009; Oxford Internet Institute, n.d.), where the Czech Republic ranked in the “medium” category, ahead of the surrounding post-communist countries, but behind Western European countries (Celot & Pérez Tornero, 2009). In 2009, the Government of the Czech Republic approved the Concept of media education in the context of lifelong learning, which reflected the recommendations of the EU, the Council of Europe and UNESCO. Since the 2008/2009 school year, schools have been able to introduce separate media education classes according to their school curricula (*Zákon č. 561/2004 Sb. Školský zákon*, 2008). Internet portals have played an important role in the development of media education, particularly the methodological portal www.rvp.cz of the National Pedagogical Institute (Národní pedagogický institut, n.d.). In 2010, the project Literacy and project-based learning, organized by the civic association Abeceda (Občanské sdružení Abeceda, n.d.), was launched. The project linked media education with the development of literacy and creative writing.

The period 2011–2019 represented a consolidation phase for media education in the Czech Republic, characterized by the revision of curriculum documents and the development of methodological support for teachers¹. Since 2011, the Recommended Expected Outcomes (REO) have been introduced as support for primary and secondary school teachers (Jiráček & Pavličíková, 2011). A significant boost came in 2015, when the European Council officially recognized the threat of online disinformation campaigns for the first time and an action plan for strategic communication was adopted (European Commission, 2018a). The following year, 2016, brought a global surge in fake news, especially in the context of the US presidential election. This situation led to the implementation of the first measures against disinformation on social media and search engines (McDougall, 2019).

Research by the Council for Radio and Television Broadcasting (RRTV) in 2016 revealed that Czech children consider digital media a normal part of life and are able to use different devices simultaneously (Jiráček et al., 2016). In the European context, the research did not yield anything that differed significantly from the results of such research in other EU member states. In the same year, the Ministry of Interior conducted a national security audit (Ministerstvo vnitra ČR, 2016), which highlighted the need to strengthen media literacy in the education system. The 2017/2018 CSI thematic report highlighted serious shortcomings in the implementation of media education – of 107 primary schools surveyed, 53 did not cover media education at all. Pupils achieved below average results in media literacy tests (primary schools 43%, secondary schools 50% compared to the expected 60%) (Česká školní inspekce, 2018). The 2018 STEM/MARK research in cooperation with Czech Television confirmed the low level of media literacy in the Czech Republic, with respondents achieving an average of only 39 out of 100 possible points (in Gyüre, 2024).

In 2019 a comprehensive EU Action Plan to combat disinformation was adopted (European Commission, 2018b) and a Media Literacy Week for all EU Member States established. These measures reflected the growing importance of media literacy in the context of the upcoming European Parliament elections and the overall democratic stability of the EU.

¹ Authors' note: The support included textbooks (e. g., Zejdová, 2011; Kašová, 2011; Bělohlová, 2013), projects (e.g., Škola médií, 2012; JSNS, n.d.; Mediální gramotnost pod lupou, n.d.) and online teaching materials (e. g., Polák, 2011; Hejsek, 2015; Labischová, 2013; Jiráček & Pavličíková, 2013).

4 Discussion

The implementation of media education in the Czech Republic after EU accession has been ambivalent. On the one hand, we observe convergence with European standards, on the other hand, specific features reflecting local historical experience with censorship and non-freedom of expression are manifested. Empirical data reveal significant shortcomings in practical implementation (the “clash” mentioned at the beginning). The thematic report of the CSI (2017/2018) identified that almost half of the primary schools surveyed do not implement media education at all, while the results of pupils’ media literacy tests were below average. These findings correspond with STEM/MARK (2018, in Gyüre, 2024) research, which confirmed the overall low level of media literacy in the Czech population. In European comparison, the Czech Republic ranked in the “medium” category, which puts it ahead of other post-communist countries but behind Western European and Scandinavian countries. This trend follows the broader geo-political division of Europe in terms of media literacy levels.

The critical question is why, despite the formal adoption of European standards and their implementation in the education system, the practical implementation and the level of media literacy achieved remains problematic. The relationship between media literacy and active citizenship, emphasized in European terms, is only gradually becoming established in the Czech environment.

4.1 Factors Influencing the Implementation of Media Education

The observed ambivalence (“clash”) between the formal adoption of European standards and the actual level of media literacy in the Czech Republic results from a complex interplay of systemic, bureaucratic, and pedagogical factors.

- **Systemic factors:** A key factor is the chosen cross-curricular topic model, which has led to the marginalization of media education in the curriculum. This model lacks a clear time allocation and qualification requirements for teachers, resulting in inconsistent instruction and a lack of specialized competencies among educators. A 2018 Czech School Inspectorate (ČŠI) report confirmed that nearly half of the schools surveyed do not implement media education at all.
- **Bureaucratic and legislative factors:** The slow legislative process has caused the Czech curriculum system to lag behind the European trend. The implementation of the Framework Education Program with cross-curricular topics was delayed, and by the time of its introduction, it was already conceptually outdated.
- **Pedagogical obstacles:** Teachers face a shortage of methodological materials, time, and financial resources. This lack of systemic support leads to low motivation for both teachers and students, as media education is often not part of mandatory instruction and is not graded.

4.2 Implications for Educational Practice and Policy

The identified ambivalence suggests that simply enshrining a topic in legislation is not sufficient to effectively enhance media literacy.

- **Policy recommendations:** A revision of the cross-curricular topic model is necessary. We propose transforming media education into a systematic field with a defined scope and qualification requirements. A possible solution could be a model where media education is offered as a separate elective subject.

- Practical recommendations: It is crucial to strengthen teachers' professional development, particularly in the didactics of media education. Furthermore, there is a need to create high-quality, modern methodological materials. Support for media literacy should be seen as a strategic investment in civic resilience rather than merely an academic goal.

4.3 Limitations of the Study

The primary limitation of this study is its reliance on secondary data analysis, which prevents a deep insight into the subjective experiences of teachers and students. The temporal scope of 2004 – 2019 is dynamic, which limits the applicability of the conclusions to current challenges, such as the rise of artificial intelligence. This study offers an analysis of systemic and conceptual factors rather than a detailed causal analysis.

5 Conclusion

The accession of the Czech Republic to the European Union was a key catalyst for the systematic introduction of media education into formal education. The European context provided the necessary legislative, conceptual and methodological framework that resulted in the introduction of media education as a cross-cutting topic in the Framework Curriculum.

The Czech concept of media education has followed a developmental trajectory towards the European mainstream, which emphasizes a balance between a critical approach to media content and creative skills. Projects funded by European funds (e.g. Understanding the Media) and conceptual documents reflecting the recommendations of the EU, the Council of Europe and UNESCO have played a fundamental role in this process.

The growing threat of disinformation after 2015, when the European Council officially recognized the dangers of online disinformation campaigns and adopted an action plan for strategic communication, brought a new dynamic to the development of media education. In the Czech environment, this initiative was reflected in a national security audit highlighting the need to strengthen media literacy.

In conclusion, the European context has fundamentally shaped the institutionalization of media education in the Czech Republic and continues to provide impetus for its adaptation to the current challenges of the information society, although practical implementation remains a challenge for the period ahead. This study may serve as a basis for an open discussion that shifts attention from bureaucratic formalities to practical and sustainable solutions.

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