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The Role of Civil Society in Overcoming Cultural Differences and Promoting Intercultural Awareness and Tolerance in the Czech Republic

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Abstract:

The situation of civil society in the Czech Republic has changed dramatically since the Velvet Revolution of 1989. This paper examines the role of civil society in overcoming cultural differences and in promoting intercultural awareness and tolerance in the Czech Republic after the fall of Communism in 1989.

During the Communist regime there were few tensions between the majority society and the minority groups living in Czechoslovakia because national differences were suppressed and the role of ideology was stressed more than nationality or ethnicity. The role of civil society was similarly reduced to involvement in leisure time activities and in other non-conflict areas. The third sector was thus denied an active involvement in the political process as it was the case in Western democratic countries.

The situation has changed significantly after the Velvet Revolution of 1989 mainly as a result of introduction of freedom of speech and of increased immigration in Czechoslovakia, and later the Czech Republic. Many civil sector organizations were established or renewed their activities in the public realm. Many of these organizations focused on the problems of ethnicity, nationality, on the role and position of national minorities within the Czech society, and on integration of immigrants from culturally different regions. Thus they also tried to promote intercultural awareness and tolerance in the Czech Republic.

This paper examines the role of the third sector in the Czech society in the field of promoting intercultural awareness and overcoming cultural differences in the Czech Republic. It focuses on the largest and most important civil society organizations active in this field in the Czech Republic. Special emphasis is put on the analysis of the aims, methods of work and programs of cultural integration and their results of the two largest organization – the Multicultural Center Prague and the People in Need Foundation in the field of intercultural education and overcoming national and ethnic differences.

1. Czechoslovakia before 1989

Czech Republic with its capital Prague is a rather young democratic state located in Central Europe with the area of only approximately 79,000 sq. km and approximately 10,250,000 inhabitants.¹ Czech Republic was formed in January 1993 as a successor of the former Czechoslovakia. **Czechoslovakia** was founded in October 1918 as a result of the World War I. as a successor state of the former Austro-Hungarian Empire. The former Czechoslovakia included the territory of the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and until 1945 also the Sub-Carpathian Ukraine, now part of Ukraine.

In the period from 1918 until 1938 Czechoslovakia was a multinational state with a variety of **national minorities**. In pre-WWII. Czechoslovakia lived approximately 15,000,000 Czechs and Slovaks, approximately 3,500,000 Germans (mainly in the border areas and in larger cities), about 1,500,000 Ruthenians, over 750,000 Hungarians about 110,000 Jews and over 100,000 Gypsies and Poles and Czechoslovakia thus was a real **multicultural society**.² National minorities in Czechoslovakia were granted the same rights as Czechs and Slovaks and the Czechoslovak constitution of 1920 also allowed them to use their national languages in the official contact with authorities.

However, the national composition of Czechoslovakia changed dramatically as a result of the **World War II**. More than 80,000 Jews from Czech Lands were killed during Nazi occupation of Bohemia and Moravia and vast majority of Germans and Hungarians were expelled after the WWII. based on the conclusions of the Potsdam conference which were incorporated in the notorious Benes decrees. Sub-Carpathian Ukraine became part of the Soviet Union in 1945 and Czechoslovakia thus became virtually a **homogenous society**.

During the forty years of **Communism** in Czechoslovakia (1948 – 1989), the homogeneity of Czechoslovak society further increased as a result of the “Iron curtain” around the Czechoslovak borders. Citizens of Czechoslovakia were not allowed to travel abroad and very few foreigners visited Czechoslovakia. Most of the people thus spent their entire lives in a homogenous society without contacts with other cultures and frequently without knowledge of other languages.

There was almost no migration of foreigners to Czechoslovakia and there was a strong pressure on the remaining small number of members of ethnic minorities to assimilate and became members of the majority Czechoslovak society. Members of national minorities were therefore often subject to **persecution**, they were frequently unable to find adequate jobs or forced to move to locations with no contact with other members of their minority.

Czech and Slovak languages were the only official languages and minorities were prohibited to use their national languages in contact with authorities or in education. Access to literature in national languages and publication in national languages were also seriously limited under Communism. This **cultural pressure** was mainly hard towards representatives of the German minority. Hungarians in Slovakia were granted some limited right to use their language in official contact with

¹ Data as of 1st quarter of 2002. For detailed information about the Czech Republic see the information of the Czech Statistical Authority at www.czso.cz.

² For more information see www.varianty.cz.

authorities mainly in Southern part of Slovakia in areas with a very dense Hungarian population.

The only significant national minority during the Communism which was voluntarily accepted by the Communist regime and offered an asylum in Czechoslovakia were approximately 40,000 immigrants from **Greece**. They were mostly members of Greek communist party who left Greece during the civil war in the late 1940s and after the victory of rightwing regime in 1950s. Most of these immigrants settled in the industrial part of Northern Moravia and even though they still spoke Greek and kept Greek cultural traditions, they also learnt Czech and were thus not understood as a distinct national minority – their Communist ideological background was considered more important than their nationality. Most of the Greek immigrants returned to Greece in the 1960s, only about 3,000 Greeks remained in Czechoslovakia.

Only in the 1980s a small number of **Vietnamese** workers were allowed to settle in Czechoslovakia as a part of inter-governmental agreement between Czechoslovakia and Vietnam. However, these migrants remained under close supervision of Vietnamese government and their contacts with Czechoslovak population were almost entirely restricted. Therefore, the Vietnamese minority was not integrated in the Czechoslovak society and did not “disturb” the cultural and ethnic homogeneity of the Czechoslovak society.

The largest national minority, **Gypsies**, was subject to heavy persecution under Communism. Gypsies were not even acknowledged as a national minority and the Gypsy language was not considered a national language. Gypsies were granted some limited rights of an ethnic group, but more frequently they were regarded as a socially-pathological group with inadaptable behavior. Therefore the Communist regime tried to transform their behavior patterns to “fit” to the ideal of a Communist person and to suppress their traditional way of life. Gypsies were forced to work and to adopt the “normal” way of life including permanent housing. Ethnic differences were thus reflected mostly in Gypsies traditional culture and art. However, many Czechs and Slovak perceived Gypsies as trouble-makers and as a source of problems already during Communism, mostly because Gypsies were perceived as “inadaptable”.

The problem of national and ethnic minorities in Communist Czechoslovakia was further reduced by existence of **censorship and by strict state control of media**. Civil society as it is known in the free world did not exist under Communism and non-governmental organizations and institutions were under very close ideological and political state supervision and focused mostly on “problem-free” activities such as leisure activities. Therefore one could very hardly find objective information about the real situation of ethnic minorities in Czechoslovakia or about ethnic problems.

2. Changes after 1989

The situation changed dramatically after the **Velvet Revolution** in November 1989 which led to the fall of Communism and to a slow transformation of Czechoslovakia into a democratic state. All of a sudden, the Czechoslovak homogenous society was exposed to both domestic and international changes which reflected the fact that Czechoslovakia was no longer an isolated state.

Domestic changes included mainly the building of a pluralistic **democratic society**. First free elections took place in 1990 which led to formation of a democratic government. Former opponent of the Communist regime, Mr. Havel, was elected the President of Czechoslovakia. Censorship was cancelled, new media were established and people thus had a freer access to independent information. Freedom of speech and other democratic freedoms, such as freedom of assembly, were also guaranteed by the new constitution.

However, the freedom of speech and end of censorship also revealed some “dark sides” which were formerly hidden and suppressed under Communism, such as nationalism which slowly became an issue also in Czechoslovakia. Fortunately the national disputes between the Czechs and the Slovaks had a peaceful character and were reflected in political struggle for independence of Slovaks rather than in violent fights such as in former Yugoslavia. Nevertheless, the perceived national oppressing of Slovaks resulted in a peaceful **split of Czechoslovakia** and in establishment of two independent democratic states in January 1993 – the Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic.

The **international** position of Czechoslovakia also changed significantly after 1989. Czechoslovakia was no longer an isolated Communist state with closed borders. After 1990, Czechoslovak borders were opened and many Czechs and Slovaks were allowed to travel to the “West”, frequently for the first time in their lives. They could not only witness the economic success of Western democratic societies, but also the cultural and ethnic diversity in the multicultural Western states.

Nevertheless, Czechs and Slovaks were no longer to encounter multiculturalism and various ethnic and national minorities only during their visits in democratic states. Due to the opening of Czechoslovak borders, the number of immigrants and **foreigners** in Czechoslovakia from all over the world increased significantly. During the 1990s, most of the immigrants and asylum seekers came from the countries of the former Soviet Union, from South-Eastern Europe (Romania, ex-Yugoslavia) and from Asia, especially from Afghanistan, India, Sri Lanka, Vietnam and China.³

However, since the majority of Czechs has had almost no personal experience from life in a multiethnic society, these immigrants were frequently **perceived** rather negatively both by ordinary citizens and by the state authorities. According to the public opinion surveys carried out during the 1990s, more than 75% of the respondents were of the opinion that “there are too many foreigners” in the Czech Republic. This approach was wide-spread mainly among older people, less educated

³ For exact numbers of immigrants since 1990 and specification of their national origin and state citizenship see the information of the Ministry of Interior of the Czech Republic – www.mvcr.cz.

people, working class and among left-oriented people from smaller towns and villages.⁴

Taking into account the approach of Czechs towards other national and ethnic minorities, the best **perceived national minorities** are Slovaks, Jews and Poles. On the contrary Gypsies, Vietnamese and Chinese are considered the most problematic. The most popular nations are Slovaks, French, Swedes and English, on the contrary the Afghanis, Palestinians, Hungarians, people from former Soviet Union and from the Balkans belong among the least popular nations.⁵

Public opinion surveys also revealed, that more then 48% Czechs perceive immigrants and refugees negatively and more than 65% of the respondents support a stricter immigration policy and restrictions of immigration in the Czech Republic. More than 55% of Czechs are against location of a refugee camp close to their homes. However, at the same time more than 60% of the respondents are against racism and over 65% of the respondents consider themselves tolerant towards national and ethnic minorities "if they are able to adapt to our life style."⁶

These **negative perceptions of immigrants and asylum seekers** are influenced especially by the fear of many Czechs of foreigners. The most frequent reasons of this fear according to the latest public opinion survey from December 2001 include the fear from increase of criminality, fear of job loss due to increased unemployment and fear of "inadaptability" of and national minorities which would lead to loss of traditional character of the Czech culture.⁷

The approach of **state authorities** to immigrants and asylum seekers in the Czech Republic is rather strict and reflects the above described position of the general public towards immigrants and asylum seekers. The issue of immigrants and asylum seekers is in the **competence** of the Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Justice and partially also Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport. The basic legislature governing the asylum procedure and the stay of foreigners in the Czech Republic are the Acts No. 325/1999 Coll., on asylum, Act No. 123/1992 Coll., on stay of foreigners and Act No. 498/1990 Coll., on refugees which was amended by the Act No. 2/2002 Coll. However, the Czech immigration and asylum policy is closely influenced by the policy of the European Union (such as the Schengen agreements), and therefore also by the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In dealing with immigrants, the Czech authorities also try to coordinate their approach and activities mainly with the neighboring states to prevent illegal immigration.

Therefore only a small number of applicants for asylum were granted the **asylum** and officially settled in the Czech Republic. Between 1990 and 2001 there were almost 50,000 asylum seekers in the Czech Republic, most of which came from Afghanistan (over 5,700), Romania (over 5,600), Ukraine (over 5,100), Bulgaria, India, Moldavia, Armenia, Yugoslavia, Georgia, Russia, Iran, Sri Lanka and Vietnam. However, in the same period, asylum was granted only to 2,100 people from 58

⁴ For detailed information about the attitude of the Czechs towards foreigners see the latest public opinion survey of the STEM institute from December 2001.

⁵ The attitudes changed only slightly in the period of 1990 – 2001. For more information about the attitude of the Czechs towards national and ethnic minorities and towards other nations see public opinion pools of the institutes for research of public opinion published also at www.stem.cz (STEM) and www.soc.cas.cz/cvvm (IVVM).

⁶ For more information about Czech attitude towards refugees and immigrants see www.soc.cas.cz/cvvm.

⁷ Public opinion survey of the STEM (Institute for Public Opinion Survey), December 2001.

countries (mostly from Romania, Afghanistan, former Soviet Union and Vietnam) which is also a clear reflection of Czech fear from foreigners and immigrants.⁸

Many applicants were returned to their countries of origin or left the Czech Republic and moved further westwards, mostly to Germany. Many **immigrants** mainly from the former Soviet Union stay in the Czech Republic illegally and work illegally in low-paid positions, mainly in the construction industry.

Special group of immigrants form the **Czech compatriots** living abroad who are being resettled in the Czech Republic based on governmental resolution from January 1996. Approximately 730 persons were resettled in the Czech Republic between 1994 and 2001, mostly from the former Soviet Union (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldavia, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan). Resettlement is managed by the Ministry of Interior in cooperation with the People in Need Foundation. Czech government together with various NGOs also organizes programs to simplify the integration of these immigrants and to assist them in finding of adequate housing and employment.

Nevertheless, despite the low number of granted asylum, the **ethnic and national composition** of the Czech society changed in the 1990s and the number of foreigners in the Czech Republic increased since the fall of Communism. Many immigrants – mainly family members of the Vietnamese minority who came to Czechoslovakia before 1989 – intend to stay in the Czech Republic and to find adequate jobs, although the Czech legislation concerning permanent stay of foreigners, grant of asylum and obtaining of Czech citizenship was toughened in the recent years.

According to the recent **2001 census**, the national composition of the Czech society is as follows: 90.3% Czechs (approximately 9,300,000), 3.7% Moravians, 1.9% Slovaks, 0.5% Poles, 0.4% Germans, 0.2% Ukrainians and Vietnamese nationality and 0.1% Gypsies, Hungarians and Russians.⁹

The Czech legal system defines **national minorities** in the Act No. 273/2001 Coll. According to this Act, a group of people must fulfill the following characteristics to be considered a national minority: 1. permanent residence and citizenship in the Czech Republic; 2. common ethnic, cultural and language characteristics different from the majority of the state; 3. common wish to be considered a national minority to protect and develop their own identity, cultural traditions and language and 4. long-term, firm and permanent relation to the territory of the Czech Republic and the people who live here.¹⁰

The largest **national minority** in the Czech Republic – about 190,000 people – are undoubtedly the Slovaks who mostly stayed in the Czech Republic after the split of Czechoslovakia in 1993. They live usually in larger towns and in border areas of Slovakia. Many Slovaks also moved to the Czech Republic in the second half of 1990s as a result of deteriorated political and economic situation in Slovakia to find better jobs and a more stable political and economic environment. In areas with

⁸ For exact numbers of asylum seekers and granted asylum see the information of the Ministry of Interior of the Czech Republic published at the internet pages (data from June 2002) <http://www.mvcr.cz/dokumenty/migrace/2000/prilohy3.html>.

⁹ For exact data from the census as per March 1, 2001 in the Czech Republic see the pages of the Czech Statistical Authority published (in June 2001) at the address <http://www.czso.cz:8005/sldbr-win/owa/qt02?xjazyk=CZ&xuzemi=1&xtyp=1>.

¹⁰ See the internet pages of the Ministry of Interior at the address www.mvcr.cz.

higher concentration of Slovak minorities, Slovaks are allowed to use their language in education. However, the use of Slovak language is frequently not very important since the Czech and Slovak languages are very similar. Slovaks are also active in the field of culture, there are several Slovak societies and associations which organize Slovak cultural events and publish newspapers and magazines in Slovak. Overall, Slovaks belong to the best perceived national minority in the Czech Republic, mostly as a result of an almost eighty year long coexistence within Czechoslovakia.

The second largest national minority are **Gypsies**. According to the estimates of NGOs who work with Gypsies, their number ranges from about 150,000 to 300,000. However, the number of Gypsies according to the last census is only less than 12,000 as many Gypsies choose to describe themselves as “Czechs” or “Moravians” instead of “Gypsy”.¹¹ This national minority has a very specific life style and values which are frequently a source of many conflicts with the majority society. Therefore, there are various programs of the government and non-governmental organizations which focus on improvement of the situation of Gypsies.

Unfortunately, the **perception of Gypsies** in the majority society remains very complicated. More than 75% Czechs throughout the 1990s considered the coexistence with Gypsies as “problematic” or “rather problematic”. The most frequent reasons of considering Gypsies as problematic are their “inadaptable” life styles, high crime rate and their generally passive attitude to work and dependence on the state social security system.¹²

Other large national minorities in the Czech Republic include Poles (approximately 50,000, mainly in Northern Moravia), Germans (40,000), Hungarians (10,000), Ukrainians, Russians, Bulgarians, Croatians, Greeks, Romanians, Vietnamese, Chinese and smaller national minorities from Arab states and Africa and other Asian states.

The **rights of national minorities** are guaranteed by the Czech constitution and the Bill of the Rights of 1993 as well as by international treaties and conventions signed by the Czech Republic, such as the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other documents of the United Nations and conventions of the Council of Europe.

Members of national minorities are entitled to use their national language in contact with state authorities and in education and fulfillment of their rights is also monitored and promoted by the Council for National Minorities which is a advisory body of the Czech government.¹³

However, in practical life there are numerous **intercultural problems** in the Czech Republic which issue mainly from lack of knowledge and interest of the

¹¹ For exact data from the census as per March 1, 2001 in the Czech Republic see the pages of the Czech Statistical Authority published (in June 2001) at the address <http://www.czso.cz:8005/sldb-win/owa/qt02?xjazyk=CZ&xuzemi=1&xtyp=1>.

¹² For detailed information about the attitude of the Czechs towards national and ethnic minorities and towards immigrants and refugees see public opinion pools of the institutes for research of public opinion STEM or IVVM published also at www.stem.cz (STEM) and www.soc.cas.cz/cvvm (IVVM).

¹³ The **Council for National Minorities** has 29 members of which 18 are representatives of national minorities living in the Czech Republic (Bulgarian, Croatian, Hungarian, German, Polish, Romas, Russian, Ruthenian, Greek, Slovak and Ukrainian). For more details see the internet pages of the Ministry of Interior at the address www.mvcr.cz.

general public as well as media and politicians in the situation of ethnic and national minorities in the Czech Republic. Most of the Czechs are not concerned about national minorities or about integration of immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers. Therefore many prejudices and stereotypes survive about the “others” which further enhances the Czech inclination towards intolerance, xenophobia and racism.

Many **non-governmental organizations** active in the Czech Republic are aware of this unsustainable relationship between the majority and minorities and focus on overcoming of national and ethnic differences and on promoting of intercultural awareness and tolerance. Their main goals and programs of selected NGOs active in this field are discussed in a more depth in the following part of my presentation.

3. Role of Civil Society in Promoting Intercultural Awareness and Tolerance

Since the revolution of 1989, many organizations and institutions of **civil society** were formed or renewed their activity and influenced the life of Czechoslovak public in virtually all areas. However, due to the development in the previous forty years, civil society suffered rather a lot and many Czechs and Slovaks adopted the position of passivity as a form of resistance against the Communist regime. Building of a civil society thus has had to overcome also these psychological barriers in the minds of Czechs and Slovaks connected with lack of trust in authority and lack of interest in public life and volunteering in general.

Civil society plays an important role in **overcoming cultural differences and promoting intercultural awareness and tolerance** in all societies worldwide. Its role is even more important in the post-Communist countries with lack of democratic experience and with undeveloped response patterns to problems of intercultural interaction. The post-Communist societies, including the Czech Republic, still have to develop adequate ways of responding to raising intercultural problems connected with increased migration after 1989 from non-European cultures with different values and life patterns.

Czech society in general is not aware of the life of different cultures and lacks interest in the work of the third sector. However, the situation has improved significantly in the recent years. Many organizations and volunteer associations currently focus on the work with immigrants and national and ethnic minorities in the Czech Republic and on overcoming of cultural differences and promoting intercultural awareness and tolerance.

There are numerous **non-governmental organizations** dealing with the problem of xenophobia and racism in the Czech Republic. The most famous NGOs focusing on improvement of intercultural awareness in the Czech Republic are the Foundation for Development of Civil Sector (NROS), the Multicultural Center Prague, the People in Need Foundation, the League of Ethnic Minorities and AFS Intercultural Programs.

The **activity of these NGOs** in the field of overcoming ethnic and national differences and increasing intercultural awareness focuses mainly on overcoming of racism and wide-spread xenophobia in the Czech society. Many of these activities focus on information campaigns in various media (television, internet, newspaper,

magazine, billboards) with the aim to increase the level of information of general public, politicians and teachers about various aspects of co-existence of the Czech majority with ethnic and national minorities. Intercultural education in schools at all levels including courses for teachers and activities for ethnic and national minorities are another priority of NGOs in this field.

Many of these NGOs also actively **work with asylum seekers and immigrants** to simplify their integration in the Czech society and acculturation to the new environment. The activity of NGOs in the field of immigration and asylum also includes lobbying related to refugee and foreigner legislation in the Czech parliament and other governmental bodies.

In my analysis I shall focus on the aspect of **education** and promotion of intercultural education in the Czech Republic, namely on the project “Cultures and Crossroads” of the Multicultural Center Prague and the project “Variants” of the People in Need Foundation.

These two specific programs issue from the **premise** that education of children and young people together with appropriate education and training of their teachers is the best way of overcoming racism and xenophobia. By getting to know each other, the students and their professors learn about other cultures, overcome national and ethnic differences in a natural and simple way and learn to understand that people from different cultures have much more in common than it may first seem and that there are more benefits of co-existence rather than isolation.

The first project, “**Cultures and Crossroads**” is a special program of the Multicultural Center Prague focused on training and education of teachers from primary schools to universities.¹⁴ This program issues from the simple idea that it is not possible to educate students about multiculturalism and ethnic tolerance if you fail to educate the teachers first. This year-long course is composed of monthly one-day long meetings of teachers during which they acquire theoretical and practical skills in multiculturalism.

During the sessions the course covers a variety of **theoretical concepts and topics connected with multiculturalism** whose knowledge is required for the teachers interested in intercultural education. These topics range from nationalism, ethnicity, racism, xenophobia, integration of national minorities and immigrants to intercultural communication and education. Theoretical background is combined with practical seminars about the individual national and ethnic minorities living in the Czech Republic, such as Gypsies, Vietnamese, Islamic minority or Jews. Part of the seminars is also presentation of work of various NGOs active in the field of intercultural education and work with asylum seekers, refugees and immigrants in the Czech Republic.

During this course, the teachers thus acquire both theoretical background in intercultural education and **practical information** about various ethnic and national groups living in the territory of the Czech Republic. They are also encouraged to transform these findings in their practical education in schools and to participate on other projects of the Multicultural Center Prague with their classes. These projects of intercultural education for school children – “Intercultural workshops” and “World Music Workshops” – focus on easy and “nonviolent” introduction of other cultures to

¹⁴ Detailed information about other activities and projects of the Multicultural Center Prague can be found at its internet address (www.mkc.cz).

school children by introducing them to the every day life of various ethnic minorities living in the Czech Republic.

The students thus have for example a chance to learn about every day life of the **Vietnamese community** by learning about their culture, tasting their national dishes, watching documentaries about Vietnam, listening to Vietnamese music or learning Vietnamese songs in direct interaction with members of the Vietnamese community. Students can learn from their own experience that Vietnamese culture is far richer than perceived by the Czech majority and that many of the stereotypes about Vietnamese are wrong.¹⁵ According to the teachers and representatives of the Multicultural Center Prague, these practical workshops have the best impact on overcoming racism and xenophobia not only by children, but also by their parents and wider environment.

The project “**Variants**” of the People in Need Foundation focuses on introduction of intercultural education at all levels of education from primary schools to universities. Its aim is to assist in the development of a democratic, pluralistic and tolerant society in the Czech Republic by overcoming of national, ethnic, religious and cultural differences between the Czech majority and various minorities living in the Czech Republic which would lead to improvement of the relations between the majority and minorities.¹⁶

In addition to incorporation of intercultural education in teaching, part of the **project “Variants”** is also information service for teachers about various intercultural projects and problems as well as access to literature and the most up-to-date researches, public opinion survey, legislature and media articles concerning multiculturalism and interethnic co-existence in the Czech Republic. However, the majority of the project focuses on the process of education itself and on development of social and intercultural skills, abilities, competence, knowledge and attitudes among students and teachers.

In **primary schools**, the program focuses mainly on incorporation of intercultural education in the regular curriculum of all classes, especially classes closely connected with the topic of ethnicity, nationalism, racism or xenophobia such as history, geography, literature, languages or civic education. This goal is important at schools in multicultural environment, mainly in larger cities in which there are nowadays common classes of students with mixed ethnic and national background.

At **universities**, the program focuses on cooperation with Education Faculties throughout the entire Czech Republic. The aim is to introduce the future teachers to the concept and principles of multiculturalism and intercultural education already during their training and education at the university. By acquisition of intercultural skills and competencies the future teachers will be later on able to incorporate these principles in their own education and teaching.

High schools are in the center of interest of the project “Variants” because high school students are on one hand the most easily influenced by racist and xenophobic ideology, and on the other hand they are best accessible to new

¹⁵ According to the public opinion surveys, Vietnamese minority in the Czech Republic is perceived “rather negatively” or “negatively” by more than 42% (public opinion survey of STEM, December 2001). The stereotypes of Vietnamese minority include the idea of Vietnamese as dirty market sellers selling smuggled goods of poor quality, especially forged textile and cosmetics.

¹⁶ For more information about this project see www.varianty.cz.

approaches and are already at an age when they can logically and reasonably argue about their positions and opinions.¹⁷ Therefore the organizers of the project issued a very detailed guide book for teachers at high schools dealing with various aspects of intercultural education.

High school teachers can use this book in their every day teaching in various subject, mainly in humanities such as languages, history, geography, psychology, philosophy, civil education or communication classes. These supporting materials should help the teachers to incorporate the principles of multiculturalism in their teaching by providing them an overview of almost all possible subjects which may come up upon their teaching. The materials also contain supporting information about the individual topics such as media articles, more detailed facts about the individual topics or various brainstorming and other games (role playing, simulations) and discussions which the teachers can use in their lessons or in discussion with students about the individual topics. The aim is to encourage development of students' critical thinking and their ability to critically evaluate the information from media and politics to be able to create and defend their own opinion about various intercultural issues and problems and to discover frequently hidden manipulations and manifestations of racism and xenophobia in media and in politics.

The **topics** covered in the intercultural education in this project range from the theoretical concepts connected with intercultural education to practical information about the individual national minorities living in the Czech Republic. Theoretical part defines the main terms used in intercultural education such as nation, ethnicity, stereotypes, prejudices, culture or interculturalism and explains the main methods and goals of intercultural education and principles of successful discussion in general. Special attention is paid to the problems of Czech education and its approach to intercultural education which has so far been a rather unimportant aspect of the education process.

Practical part includes detailed information about the major national minorities living in the Czech Republic. Students learn for example about Gypsies, Jews, Islam, Germans, Vietnamese, Chinese or Ukrainians with the aim to provide them with objective information to fight the wide-spread prejudice about the lifestyle and culture of these national minorities. Special attention is also paid to gays and lesbians which is a topic that has been a taboo until recently and many schools still do not discuss this subject as something unacceptable.

4. Conclusion

During the **Communist regime** in Czechoslovakia, there were almost no tensions between the majority society and minority groups living in Czechoslovakia as Czechoslovakia was almost a homogenous state and national differences were suppressed as the role of ideology was stressed more than nationality or ethnicity.

¹⁷ According to the public opinion survey carried out by the People in Need Foundation among high school students, most of the students described the themselves as tolerant, but critical towards minorities. The most positively perceived national groups by these students were Czechs, Slovaks and Africans. On the other hand, Gypsies are perceived most negatively. More than 70% of the students, however, stated, that they personally witnessed manifestations of racism and more than 45% of the students answered that they see the Czechs as racist and intolerant nation with prejudice and inclination to discrimination against national minorities (For more details see www.varianty.cz).

The role of civil society was similarly reduced to involvement in leisure time activities and in other non-conflict areas. NGOs were thus denied a more active involvement in the political process as it was the case in Western democratic states.

The situation has changed significantly after the **Velvet Revolution** of 1989 as a result of introduction of freedom of speech and opening of borders connected with increased immigration. Many of the NGOs focused their activity on the relationship between the majority society and various national and ethnic minorities in the Czech Republic and on integration of **immigrants** from culturally different regions. Thus they also tried to promote intercultural awareness and tolerance in the Czech Republic.

However, despite the endeavor of the non-governmental organizations to promote intercultural awareness and tolerance, the majority of the Czech society is still rather **hostile** towards foreigners and immigrants. Therefore NGOs also initiated programs focusing on intercultural education in order to overcome the prejudice, stereotypes and barriers in communication with members of national and ethnic minorities living in the Czech Republic.

The **projects** “Cultures and Crossroads” of the Multicultural Center Prague and the “Variants” of the People in Need Foundation are examples of working programs in intercultural education. Hopefully in a long-term, these programs will contribute to promotion of intercultural awareness and tolerance among young people – and later among all society members – in the Czech Republic.

5. Sources

Governmental Sources:

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Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic – www.mzv.cz

Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport of the Czech Republic – www.msmt.cz

Ministry of Justice of the Czech Republic – www.justice.cz

Government of the Czech Republic – www.vlada.cz

Czech Statistical Authority – www.czso.cz

Non-governmental Organizations:

STEM (Center for Empirical Research) – www.stem.cz

IVVM (Institute for Research of Public Opinion) – www.soc.cas.cz/cvvm

NROS (Foundation for Development of Civil Sector) – www.nros.cz

League of Ethnic Minorities – www.lem.cz

AFS Intercultural Programs – www.afs.cz

People in Need Foundation – www.pinf.cz

Multicultural Center Prague – www.mkc.cz

Project “Variants” – www.varianty.cz