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The Unidentifiable: Children of Czech Citizens Whose Mother Tongue is not Czech

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Abstract

Discussions on integrating students whose mother tongue is not Czech into the Czech education system tend to concentrate on foreign nationals but often fail to take into account those students whose parents are Czech citizens but whose mother tongue is not the language of majority society. Data from the Czech population census confirm that there are a significant number of such people in the Czech Republic. It is therefore possible that at least some children who have Czech citizenship in fact grow up in a foreign-language environment and therefore may have difficulties with the Czech language when they start school. Nevertheless, there are very few measures designed to support the linguistic integration of those children whose mother tongue is not Czech. By analysing the statistical data from population censuses the article aims to show that the potential number of such children currently significant and may even increase in the future.

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1. Introduction

Although net migration in the Czech Republic was positive throughout its post-war history, immigration figures remained low up until the Velvet Revolution in 1989; once the Iron Curtain fell, the number of immigrants gradually began to rise. There was a sharp increase in the number of immigrants after the Czech Republic joined the European Union in 2004. While in 1985 there were just 37,000 foreigners living on the territory of what is today the Czech Republic, a figure equal to around 0.36% of the country's population, as of 31 May 2009 the Czech Ministry of

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Interior recorded a record number of 444,000 foreigners in the country, which is almost a twelvefold increase (CSU, *Cizinci v ČR* – basic monthly data). This brings the share of foreigners in the population to more than 4%.[†]

One favourable response to the current migration situation (which is somewhat atypical in the country's post-war history) has been the gradual adoption of education legislation aimed at facilitating and supporting the successful integration of 'non-Czech' students into the education system at every level of the system. However, one fact is generally overlooked: the children of people who are Czech citizens but whose nationality is not Czech and whose mother tongue, it may be assumed, is also not Czech may in many respects face similar difficulties with integration into the education system. These children may be the offspring of minority nationalities traditionally resident in the Czech Republic or, in most cases, the offspring of second-generation immigrants who have obtained Czech citizenship. If the education system is to provide successful and effective support for children from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, it needs to expand its focus and consider the needs of more than just the children of foreigners. Similar support should be devoted to the children of Czech citizens growing up in a foreign-language environment and who may face the same problems as foreigners when they start school. There are basically two groups of students in the Czech Republic who may encounter similar problems in the school environment and whose situation should therefore in many respects be addressed in the same way:

1. Foreign pupils (legal migrants, asylum-seekers, illegal migrants^{*}).
2. The children of Czech citizens whose nationality[§] is not Czech^{**} or who identify as Czech by nationality but whose native tongue is not Czech.

This paper seeks to show that there are a considerable number of citizens in the Czech Republic who might speak a language other than Czech in the home. We shall therefore attempt to estimate the number of citizens in the Czech Republic who are of a nationality other than Czech, and the number who claim Czech nationality but also indicate that Czech is not their native language. In order to meet these objectives, differences in the nature of the data require that we use different methods with different degrees of reliability.

2. Materials and Methods

The only way to produce a reliable estimate of the potential scope of the problem is to analyse data from the population censuses. While schools are obliged by the state to collect detailed statistical information about foreign pupils that can be of secondary use for planning and designing special language-integration programmes, schools do not and cannot collect any similar data about children who are Czech nationals. Thus, the population census is the only available source of information that can be used for our purposes. The census collects data about the number of citizens in the Czech Republic whose nationality is other than Czech.^{††} The census is also the only source of information on the native language of residents, both foreigners and Czech nationals. We need information on both the declared nationality of members of the population and their native language. We assume that at least some of the

[†] According to the 2011 Population and Housing Census, there were 422,276 foreigners residing in the Czech Republic (*Zakladni vysledky Scitani...* 2012).

[‡] In January 2008 an amended Education Act came into effect (Act No. 343/2007 Coll.), the objective of which was to ensure the rights of children to free basic education in conformity with the Convention on the Rights of the Child. It guarantees access to basic education and educational services for all children of foreigners regardless of their background country and regardless of whether they can demonstrate that they are legally residing in the Czech Republic.

[§] The 'nationality' of members of the population is observed on the basis of the following definition: 'membership in a group of people with a common background, culture, and/or language, religion, or other characteristic that distinguishes them from the rest of the population' (Prucha, 2001, pp. 22-23).

^{**} For the purpose of simplicity, in this paper those persons who declared Moravian or Silesian nationality in the census will be regarded as having declared Czech nationality. Distinguishing between Czech, Moravian, and Silesian nationality is irrelevant for the main concern of this paper – the integration of foreign pupils who speak a language other than Czech into the Czech education system.

^{††} The Census Act (Act No. 158/1999 Coll., on the Population and Housing Census in 2001) gave respondents the right to freely choose how to answer the question on nationality. This 'declaratory' method allowed people to express their subjective opinion about their nationality, because membership in a nationality is not based solely on objective reality. The census in 2011 used a similar approach, the difference being that it allowed respondents to indicate two nationalities or to refuse to answer the question.

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