Democratization through education? Theory and practice of the Czech post-revolution education system and its reforms

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ABSTRACT

The transformation process from an authoritarian/totalitarian system entails many institutional changes, however, the individual citizen is often being overlooked in this chaotic, fast-paced process and his or her “transformation” into a democrat is taken for granted. The changing socio-political system and its exigencies may lead to nostalgia and social frustrations, which in turn cause democratic backsliding. In order to cultivate a democratic society and avoid future backsliding, the post-communist states quickly set out to reform their educational systems, both in form and substance. By reviewing the reform process of the Czech educational system and discussing the prevailing legacies left by the communist regime, the article will show that through the “destruction” of the former system and its de-monopolization, decentralization and de-ideologization, the state deliberately lost significant means and power to transform Czechs from “homo sovieticus” to “homo democraticus” and is now left with a dependence on the highly autonomous schools and their propensity to foster democratic generations that will uphold the democratic state in the future. This paradox is reminiscent of the so-called Böckenförde dilemma, claiming that the liberal democratic state “lives by prerequisites which it cannot guarantee itself”.

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1. Introduction

The foreign policies and the development assistance programs of post-communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) maintain an inherent value in their capacity to transfer their so-called transformation experience onto states that are currently undergoing (or likely to undergo) a political transition from an authoritarian or totalitarian system into a democratic one. The CEE countries take pride in the added value that their foreign assistance entails and as illustrated by the Czech Republic, have even set up departments within their Ministries of Foreign Affairs, which focus particularly on transformation assistance.1 Of course, the transferability of this experience into different socio-political and cultural contexts is questionable. However, general conclusions, lessons learned and best practices can — at least in their rough shape — serve as valuable insights for any stakeholders engaging in the transition process (Pithart et al., 2006).

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The lessons learned derived from each transformation process are positive (learning from successful changes) and negative (learning from unsuccessful changes) and the effects of some reforms can be observed in the short to medium term, while the outcomes of others will only be experienced by succeeding post-transformation generations. One of the reforms that needs time to breed seeds, yet which is crucial for the consolidation of democracy, is educational reform. Education is an asset and liability for every political regime — it is used and misused to generate a citizenship with characteristics necessary for the political and economic survival of that regime. It thus comes as no surprise that among the first steps of a transitioning society is to “deconstruct” the educational system of the past and bring forth a new one (Birzea, 1996). In the case of post-1989 Czechoslovakia, the initial stage of educational reform was labeled as “a period of annulation or correction” of the past shortcomings caused by the totalitarian regime (Cerych et al., 2000). The primary goal of the initial phase was “the de-ideologisation of the legal documents, including curricula programmes, and de-monopolization of state education” (Greger and Walterová, 2007, 15).

Despite the fact that the educational system in democratic regimes is significantly more decentralized and de-ideologized than education in authoritarian and totalitarian systems, the substance of education also has meaningful effects on the stability and survival of democratic governance. In fact, it has been noted that the “quality of democratic governance depends on the quality of input from citizens, which, in turn, depends upon their knowledge about democratic politics” and that political knowledge about democracy is “a principal resource of democratic citizens and a keystone to other democratic requisites” (Cho, 2014, 197). This so-called theory of democratic learning observes how knowledge of democracy and its norms orients citizens away from non-democratic alternatives. Studies from the United States and Sub-Saharan Africa have shown that the more informed ordinary citizens are about the processes and principles of democracy, the more likely they are going to endorse its virtues (McClosky and Zaller, 1984). Michael Bratton and his colleagues even state that “understanding of democracy is a top-ranked element explaining why some Africans demand democracy and others do not” (Bratton et al., 2005, 274).

It should thereby be the interest of states undergoing a democratic transition from an authoritarian/totalitarian system — where, in addition, democratic governance was discredited by negative propaganda in the past — to nurture democratic citizenship through civic education. In this sense, donors like the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) have implemented projects in transforming countries such as Poland or South Africa that provide adult civic education, which aims to increase the people’s awareness of political participation and close the participation gap between elites and non-elites (Blair, 2003). Such studies confirm the theoretical presumption that knowledge about democracy contributes to democratic development by fostering democratic citizens. As leading Czech scholar of pedagogy states in one of his very last texts, “The best of laws cannot ensure the sustainability of a free society, unless due respect of democracy and freedom will be present in the minds and actions of citizens” (Kalous, 2015, 221).

As part of the efforts of passing on the lessons learned of CEE countries’ transformation experience, the aim of this article is to map the necessities of educational system reform in the post-1989 Czechoslovakia/Czech Republic with a specific view toward civic education as a requisite for building democratic citizenship. Through process-tracing and with the benefit of hindsight, the article will show that through the “destruction” of the former education system and its de-monopolization, decentralization and de-ideologisation, the state deliberately lost significant means and power to transform Czechs from “homo sovieticus” to “homo democraticus” and is left with hope that the highly autonomous schools will foster democratic generations that will uphold the democratic state in the future. This “hope”, however, is reminiscent of the so-called Böckenförde dilemma, formulated in 1976 by the German constitutional judge Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde. He believed that the liberal, secularized state lives on the basis of assumptions that it itself cannot guarantee. That is the great gamble it has made, for the sake of liberty. As a liberal state it can only endure if the freedom it bestows on its citizens takes some regulation from the interior, both from a moral substance of the individuals and a certain homogeneity of society at large. On the other hand, it cannot by itself procure these interior forces of regulation that is not with its own means such as legal compulsion and authoritative decree. Doing so, it would surrender its liberal character and fall back, in a secular manner, into the claim of totality it once led the way out of, back then in the confessional civil wars (Böckenförde, 1976, 60).

In other words, the dilemma pertains to the situation when the modern secular state was forced to cut itself loose from traditional means of legitimation — religious legitimation above all — for the sake of keeping peace among its citizens (Hollerich, 2017, 24). But as a consequence, the state lacks the means to enforce itself upon the people. The dilemma can be equally applied to the post-communist liberal democratic state, which transitioned from a totalitarian state that, apart from material rewards, used coercion and indoctrination, often resembling religious practice (Kula, 2005), as means of legitimation.

2 By de-ideologization we do not mean that the educational system now lacks any ideological underpinnings. From a purely descriptive, non-normative perspective we can claim that the liberalism that undergirds the current system is just another ideology that replaced Marxism-Leninism.

3 The term homo sovieticus is a sarcastic and critical reference to the mindset and conformity of the average person living in the Soviet Union and generally within the Soviet Bloc. The term was popularized by Soviet writer and sociologist Aleksandr Zinoviev (1986) through his book titled Homo Sovieticus. The term homo democraticus was used, for example, by Gorka, 2007 who employed it critically, saying that “when foreign governments get involved in the business of building another nation’s democracy, in engineering Homo Democraticus to replace Homo Sovieticus, they undermine the very liberty they are trying to protect.”
In the first two parts of the article we are going to review from a theoretical perspective the changes taking place in a society undergoing a political transformation and the role of nostalgia and memory of the former regime. We are also going to examine what exigencies and new responsibilities the given changes place on the individual citizen and how his or her role vis-à-vis state and society changes. The third part of the article will demonstrate how the educational system can be crucial for helping citizens in a transformed society navigate in the shifting system. Furthermore, it will trace the process of education reform (focused on primary and secondary schools) in post-1989 Czechoslovakia/Czech Republic, its main goals, outcomes and expectations. Three areas of the reform will be scrutinized more closely – decentralization of the education system, curriculum change and teacher training. With a specific focus toward education of civics, the article will then discuss the prevailing ills of the Czech education system in context of the conducted reforms. The conclusion will juxtapose the thesis of this article with the Böckenförde dilemma.

2. Nostalgia and memory in post-transformation societies

The transformation process from an authoritarian/totalitarian system entails many institutional changes. The formal rules of governance, bureaucratic procedures, civilian-military relations and other structural modifications take place in the name of democratizing the formerly authoritarian state (Asmerom and Reis, 1996; Kriz, 2010). However, the individual citizen is often being overlooked in this chaotic, fast-paced process and his or her “transformation” into a democrat is taken for granted. Yet, it is the individual citizen and his or her experience with the everyday reality of the new democratic regime, which is the primary factor in determining the future stability and consolidation of democratic governance.

Political thinkers ever since Plato have been discussing the so-called “paradox of democracy” — that is, the simple question: what if citizens in a democracy no longer wish to live a democratic polity and use the instrument of elections to vote for an authoritarian or totalitarian regime? (Novák, 2003, 22). A post-transformation society is not only a society looking toward brighter and freer futures, but also a society that can compare the current (transformed) regime with the former regime. Indeed, individuals that have spent a part of their life in the past regime can readily juxtapose the two regimes and project their positive and negative memories onto the current state of affairs.

In this sense, we must keep in mind that the human mind is selective. Unpleasant memories are often sidelined to make space for the more pleasant ones and our experience with various events generally tends to become distorted after time (Kahneman, 2012, 391–397). Nostalgic sentiments selected from life in the past regime can thus be projected onto the individual citizen’s experience with his or her current life, leading in the worst case to significant frustrations. As described by a former Czechoslovakian border guard and policeman

So there’s freedom: people can travel, and I can say what I want, write what I want, you see? But in terms of, say, the economy … five textile companies have disappeared, and there’s not one left. You see? Do we really need four Kaufland supermarkets? Oh, give me a break … And all that dirty business you don’t see today. Things like that didn’t happen even in the Communist times. No, never. And how are we supposed to come to terms with that? We are the generation that

More importantly, the second generation of citizens in a transformed political system has at its disposal only second-hand accounts of the past — either through formal channels (that is, schools, museums or media) or informal channels (parents’ and grandparents’ accounts). Depending on the balance of information the second generation receives, their pictures of life in the past regime may be significantly distorted and create a form of false nostalgia. The following account of a parent is illustrative of the case

I don’t want to seem like I’m in favor of socialism, but one tends to remember just the good things. One way or another, you could always deal with the queues, and you could always be sure you’d get paid every month — unlike now. My younger son sometimes gets paid a month late or not at all. Before, everything was more certain, especially in terms of work. You could take out a loan. Now you never know what tomorrow will bring. (Vanek and Mücke, 2016, 139)

A post-transformation society will unavoidably conduct comparisons with the past. Although the past may not resonate in public discourse (but it usually does), it will always be intimately present in the memories of individuals. The challenge this poses for the survival of democracy is that these memories may often be constructed (especially in the minds of the second generation) and thus distorted and overly idealized. Therefore, a yearning for a return to the past when life was “simpler”, “easier” and “more comfortable” may emerge. Moreover, freedom’s sudden lack of structure may lead to frustrations among parts of the society — Erich Fromm observed already in 1941 that during the process of becoming freed from authority, people are often left with feelings of hopelessness and these feelings will not abate until some form of replacement of the old order is developed (Fromm, 1969). Nostalgia and distorted memories may hence easily lead to democratic backsliding.

4 The quotes in this article are taken from an oral history publication, where the interviewees/narrators are anonymous. Since the authors quoted had not disclosed the names, this article will not provide the names either. The interviewed people are “random”, common people.
3. Individual responsibility and democracy

Allowing ourselves to generalize a bit about the political and economic transformations of the CEE countries, we can say that the new democratic regimes have brought increased individual responsibility for every citizen’s own well-being. While in the communist regimes, the citizen had a collective responsibility for the common good, individual responsibility was somewhat dissolved and “outsourced” to the state and party (Necasova, 2018). Especially if a citizen was a loyal party member, job security, housing and income were a guarantee. The account of a former Czechoslovak miner describes the new situation after the Velvet Revolution (1989)

To me, work has always been everything, whether under socialism or now. I never had to think about it back then … I feel sorry for those who are unemployed today. Without work, I’d feel as if I had both legs amputated … When I lost my job in 2000 and couldn’t find another one for nearly half a year, and had to go to the Labor Office every week, I really started to have the darkest thoughts. (Vaněk and Mücke, 2016, 117)

 Needless to say, the positive (social and economic) rights citizens had under communism were a trade-off for foregoing their negative (absent civil and political) rights. So, for example, in terms of political decisions and the responsibility to vote, the state “decided for” its citizens by providing a single ballot to “choose” from and thereby “relieving” the citizen of the responsibility to be actively involved in politics (apart from the mandatory act of voting per se).

A democratic political system coupled with a market economy, however, requires increased responsibility on the part of the individual — not just responsibility for himself or herself, but for his or her family and the rest of society. Job security depends on the individual’s ability to compete in the labor market, home ownership or paying the rent is also contingent on one’s ability to generate income. Voting suddenly becomes consequential and choosing the party and candidates that suit one’s preferences, one’s family, the society at large and posterity becomes a demanding task. As per John Stuart Mill, “The power which the suffrage gives is not over himself alone; it is power over others also; whatever control the voter is enabled to exercise over his own concerns, he exercises the same degree of it over those of everyone else” (Mill, 2008, 22–23).

The state no longer decides for citizens as to which future is best suited for them. In a free society, the state no longer prescribes what to think and how to act, thus creating an increased level of uncertainty among a part of the population (Fromm, 1969). It is the responsibility of the citizens to be active and informed about politics so that they make responsible decisions. In short, with freedom comes responsibility and the state does not aim to be present in every aspect of the individual’s life and guide him or her “by the hand”. To better cope with this sudden increase in individual responsibility, the newly democratic systems in CEE countries have, for example, maintained fairly generous welfare states (Cook, 2007).

Nevertheless, due to this newly acquired responsibility over various aspects of one’s life, the individual in a transitioning society has to navigate in a significantly different world with different rules of the game and patterns of behavior. Moreover, the changing of these rules and patterns is further accelerated by the “liquid modernity” of Western democracies (Bauman, 2000).5

An example of this new “world” is the reconceptualization of success and especially lack thereof (which breeds social frustrations). In the past regime, lack of success in an individual’s life could have been attributed to and blamed simply on the omnipresent “communist regime”, because the system conditioned and often restricted the vertical movement within social and professional hierarchies while claiming to ensure economic and societal equality. This was given by the fact that part of the communist social contract was a trade-off between the individual and the state, wherein the individual surrenders his or her negative rights in exchange for a promise of the provision of positive rights. The forty years of communism left a social-psychological mark on the societies as the “socialist masters systematically extinguished initiative” and “created a climate that socialized a passive, dependent populace” with a “readiness to externalize blame” (Post, 2004, 170). But in the new, democratic system — which (in theory) does not condition and restrict the vertical movement within social and professional hierarchies and which stands on a social contract that emphasizes negative over positive rights and thereby renders the autonomous individual significantly more responsible for his or her own well-being — who can the individual “blame” for his or her lack of propensity to ensure a decent well-being (which in itself is a very subjective issue) for his or her self and family?

Again, in theory, in a free society the individual shall attribute the causes of failure mostly to him or herself, as the system is designed to provide the full opportunities for individual success. In practice, of course, external and systemic obstacles may hinder opportunities for individual development. But even if hypothetically most of the “blame” shall objectively rest with the individual, most human beings opt for external attribution of error (Heider, 1958, 169–173). As American social psychologist Bernard Weiner claims, “it is ego-defensive to place fault externally rather than on the self” as “external ascriptions for failure maintain self-worth relative to internal ascriptions” (Weiner, 1992, 245). Thus, as the individual needs to blame the “external

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5 Bauman sees the current era as one of constant fluidity and lack of structures (solidity). This affects the stability of human identities, which are constantly redefined and sought for. He claims that “Forms of modern life may differ in quite a few respects — but what unites them all is precisely their fragility, temporariness, vulnerability and inclination to constant change. To ‘be modern’ means to modernize — compulsively, obsessively; not so much just ‘to be’, let alone to keep its identity intact, but forever ‘becoming’, avoiding completion, staying undefined. Each new structure which replaces the previous one as soon as it is declared old-fashioned and past its use-by date is only another momentary settlement — acknowledged as temporary and ‘until further notice’…” What was some time ago dubbed (erroneously) ‘post-modernity’ and what I’ve chosen to call, more to the point, ‘liquid modernity’, is the growing conviction that change is the only permanence, and uncertainty the only certainty. A hundred years ago ‘to be modern’ meant to chase ‘the final state of perfection’ — now it means an infinity of improvement, with no ‘final state’ in sight and none desired.” (Bauman, 2000; viii).
system” (at least partially) for his or her lack of success, the democratic system provides a less straightforward scapegoat than the communist system. Nonetheless, for post-communist societies being “accustomed for so long to (justly) blaming their own government, it was an easy transition to continue to externalize blame”, and thereby pose additional potential problems for the survival of democracy (Post, 2004, 171).

To paraphrase the prolific words of German political thinker Ralf Dahrendorf, it takes six months to adopt a new constitution, three years to adopt a market economy, but merely three generations to build a democratic civil society (Dahrendorf, 1990, 92–93). It is democrats who form civil society, not just NGOs and other watchdog groups. The democratic citizen is the most effective watchdog. But in order to be an effective watchdog of democracy, the citizen must be aware of his or her civil and political rights, of the procedures of democracy and the functions of the market. The citizen must also be aware of the potential flaws in democracy and markets, in order to be prepared for setbacks and at the same time work toward the amelioration of these flaws. The most accessible way (from the perspective of governments) to form democrats and facilitate the lives of citizens within a political and economic system based on individual responsibility is through corresponding education. As Czech theoretician of education and pedagogy, Jaroslav Kalous, described

Every society has a system of education that matches its political establishment. In an authoritarian system, schools teach children obedience and respect for authority. Every totalitarian power was well aware of the important role of education, and therefore ensured that it fully served its interests. In a democratic society, children should learn to think and decide independently, to have leadership skills but also to be able to subordinate to leadership, to tolerate differences of opinion, to cooperate with others and to respect the rights of others. (Kalous, 2015, 220)

4. The post-1989 education reform process

Few pundits and commentators would disagree with the claim that democracy in the Czech Republic was strengthened after the Velvet Revolution with the external help of the European Union and the country’s accession to NATO. Even though NATO is a military alliance, the preamble of the North Atlantic Treaty states that its members are “founded on the principles of democracy” and before any country becomes a member, it must demonstrate that its military is controlled by civilian institutions, for example (North Atlantic Treaty, 1949). The EU, through the Copenhagen criteria, provides tools and mechanisms to pre-accession states that help build democratic institutions, civil society and strengthen the capacity of the government and its bureaucrats in governing the country.

All these tools were, of course, applied in the Czech Republic and hence helped foster a democratic system of governance. Yet both organizations, which were vital for the development of democracy in all the CEE countries, place little emphasis on the role of education of citizens in the new political system. Within the EU, education is the ultimate domain of the nation state and conceivably this is why Brussels did not issue any accession conditions for future member states in this realm. Nevertheless, just as the external pressure by the EU to transform political institutions in the Czech Republic facilitated and perhaps sped-up the transition process, recommendations regarding the design of the primary and secondary education sector could have at least inspired political elites to consider it as one of the pillars of the democratization process.

To be fair, some external funding into the sector of Czech education was made available through the EU PHARE (Poland and Hungary Aid for Restructuring of the Economy) program (mainly projects focused on the reconstruction of the education system PHARE RES), the Soros Foundation, The British Council, the United States Information Agency, MENT (Man, Education and New Technologies), Education for Democracy and the Peace Corps (Mays et al., 1996, 7). Other actors, such as the World Bank, provided recommendations regarding social stabilization and cohesion in formerly centrally-planned economies — one of its recommendations regarding education was to foster a “consensus what to teach the young” (Heyneman, 1995). But despite this funding, primary and secondary school curricula have received only marginal interest by Czech political elites. Even after nearly thirty years since the revolution, the debate about reforming the schooling system continues but is quite hollow and even politically unattractive (when compared to issues such as migration). This can be demonstrated by looking at the discussions about education during the Czech parliamentary elections of 2017 — while all political parties agree that “something needs to be done” about the education system, few subjects have a long-term systematic view of the problem (EDUin, 2017b).

The months following the Velvet Revolution brought immediate efforts to reform the Czech(oslovak) education system. Of course, education curricula under communism were heavily infused with Marxist-Leninist ideology, which tended to promote uniformity at the expense of individual development. The logic of a totalitarian political system also required the educational system to be highly centralized. Access to (mainly higher) education was based politically and determined by the social, economic and partisan background of one’s family. Thereby, parents, fearful of hindering their children’s chances of attaining a quality education and hence occupation, rarely challenged the system and its requisites. In general terms, every educational system in socialist countries was characterized by six principles: centralization, bureaucratization, unification, ideological monism, Sovietization (Russification) and economization or subordination of education to the alleged needs of the economy (Anweiler, 1992).

In light of the specifics of the educational system in a communist regime, it was deemed imperative in the initial phase of the Czechoslovak transformation to reform the system as a whole — a process often labeled as deconstruction (Greger, 2015, 76). The reform process was not entirely top-down driven. Civil society groups provided input and pressured the Ministry of Education to introduce autonomous schools with diversified curricular options, “humanize” education and make it child-
centered, focus on critical skills and problem-solving and generally presented a vision of a “democratic pluralistic and open educational system” (Mays et al., 1996, 8).

Already in 1992, Prucha enumerated the fundamental changes that took place in the sector since 1989. These were:

a) Political independence of education (change from totalitarian regime to no political governance in education);
b) Change from Marxist doctrine to philosophical and ideological pluralism in education;
c) Introduction of school alternatives through privatization;
d) Decentralization of education;
e) Change from political criteria, for example, party membership for educational access, to criteria related to achievement and ability;
f) Change from Russian to English as a first foreign language;
g) Curricular reformation (Cited in Mays et al., 1996, 3).

Simply put, the aims of the initial reforms were the immediate de-ideologization and de-monopolization of education (Greger, 2015, 76). However, as claimed by Kotasek, Greger and Prochazkova, the initial phase of reforms had destructive effects on certain provisions within the system, such as the abolition of the institutional system for the life-long training of teachers or reducing public pre-school education (Kotasek et al., 2004, 3). Moreover, abolishing the teaching of Marxist doctrines in primary and secondary school curricula inadvertently lead to creating a vacuum of suitable instructional materials in civics, history and social studies, while “a new ideology of democracy and tolerance has not yet taken its place” (Mays et al., 1996, 8). Therefore, the initial phase of deconstruction had to recast into a phase, where the nascent system would acquire clear framework and substance — but this turned out to be a problem.

Civil society actors engaged in the reform process, experts, academics and the general population agreed that change was desirable, but there was actually little consensus regarding the direction of educational changes. In the absence of a clear vision on the part of the decision-making authorities, two basic views were put forward — one view believed the free market would decide the necessary direction of education reforms; the other view proposed a slower and more cautious approach to reforms, allowing the incremental development of a vision. Thus, without a vision and a general consensus, the government in the first half of the 1990s adopted a “band-aid” approach to educational change (Mays et al., 1996, 9). Within a span of only five months after the revolution, the deep structural changes of Czech educational system were implemented without any supporting research and analyses and mainly as a result of the pressure of interest groups and civil society (Kalous, 2015, 215). All the changes took place as amendments to the 1984 schooling act and it was not until 2004 that the country’s legislature passed a wholly new law (no. 561/2004 Col.) governing primary and secondary education and whereby the system received a new framework. Three core areas (decentralization, curriculum reform and teacher training), which permitted the Communist regime to maintain significant control over education — and on which the post-revolution reforms of the system thereby concentrated — are discussed below.

4.1. Decentralization

The post-revolution reaction to an overly centralized communist education system may in the Czech case be characterized as an “over-reaction”. In the name of de-monopolization, the rigid political and ideological control of the system was replaced by school autonomy, that is, “unusually large and unparalleled in many West European countries” (Cerych et al., 2000). As Herbst and Wojciuk point out “the Czech Republic went a long way along the decentralization path and left markedly few competencies (1%) to its central government” (Herbst and Wojciuk, 2017, 125). In comparison with other OECD member states, the Czech Republic today “remains one of the countries with highest percentage of decisions being made directly at the school level (68%), and has a noteworthy scope of competencies (28%) assigned to local governments” (Herbst and Wojciuk, 2017, 125). For example, teachers have significant autonomy in choosing their preferred teaching methods and approaches and textbooks are chosen by schools, albeit from a wide list pre-approved by the Ministry of Education. The basic documents for the development of every individual school are the long-term “Strategic Plans of School Development”, which are at the responsibility of school principals and have to be developed with staff participation and approved by the school council.

The decentralization of the system was soon met with criticism claiming that the process had gone too far in too short a period of time and had not been properly designed. As broad competencies were assigned to school principals, finding the balance between the responsibilities and freedoms of schools became an issue and diverted attention to quality control (Greger and Walterová, 2007, 31). The school autonomy and empowerment of principals: “was not accompanied by monitoring and feedback arrangements, and this eventually caused teachers’, principals’ and schools’ accountability for educational performance to deteriorate” (Herbst and Wojciuk, 2017, 130).

The question of evaluation in a decentralized education system was seen as central by the National Programme for the Development of Education in the Czech Republic (White Paper) published in 2001 by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports (MoEYS). The key document states that: “A higher degree of school autonomy which means that a school is held responsible for its teaching needs to be balanced by a systematic evaluation of achievements to ensure the quality and effectiveness of its work”—emphasis in original (Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, 2001, 41). Apart from mandatory annual
self-evaluations, Czech schools are externally assessed by the Czech school inspectorate and since 2006 by the Centre for the Evaluation of Educational Achievements (CERMAT).

4.2. Curriculum reform

Decentralization of the system manifests itself in curriculum development. In communist Czechoslovakia centrally developed time plans and uniform syllabi were implemented compulsorily in every school and teachers played the role of “transmitters” since only one set of textbooks for every subject was officially available (Greger and Walterová, 2007, 26). The de-ideologization of education started very early in the transformation process as greater choice of textbooks and methods increased curricular school autonomy. But a more systematic approach to curricular autonomy did not take place until 2005 when the national curriculum was abandoned and replaced with general guidelines — the New curriculum model for basic education. Today, the guidelines are developed by MoEYS and define the objectives of basic education, the key competencies to be acquired, the general content of subjects and learning outcomes and also provide a framework timetable and the minimum total number of hours for the educational areas per week. However, school principals have significant autonomy in adjusting them “according to local needs, altering timetables (up to 10%) and teaching programmes (up to 30%)” (Herbst and Wojciuk, 2017, 127).

Among the key competencies, that Czech schools ought to develop among its students are: creative thinking and problem solving; development of cooperative strategies and respect for others; development of a free and responsible personality aware of its rights and duties; support of tolerance and the development of self-awareness, including awareness of one’s own abilities and opportunities (Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, 2016). The guidelines also include “cross-curricular” topics, such as the “education of a democratic citizen”, “media studies” and “education for coherent thinking in European and global dimensions”.

The enumerated competencies and cross-curricular topics are indeed the ones necessary for an individual’s life in a democratic, capitalist society. But the implementation of such curricular changes — mostly concerning the teaching of civics and history — is a very complicated and complex process and as Greger and Walterova point out, “written curricula can be changed by experts but real change depends on teachers.” The teachers were considered the crucial implementators of the new curricular model, but “have not been appropriately prepared for new tasks” (Greger and Walterová, 2007, 28).

4.3. Teacher training

A possible reason why teachers were not “appropriately prepared for the new tasks” is connected to the “destruction” of the old educational system. An obvious part of the communist educational system was a notable level of attempted teacher indoctrination. After the February 1948 coup d’état, when the Communist party of Czechoslovakia affirmed its position, the party was “doing everything possible to reeducate the teachers retained from pre-communist days [and trying] to secure a steady influx of students of working class origin to teacher training institutions” (Taborsky, 1961, 540). As every teacher passed on knowledge and formed the minds of next generations, it was necessary that: “only teachers who brought up the children in a socialist spirit could stay in their profession” (Glenn, 1995, 176). A teacher was considered a public political worker that actively enforced policies of the Czechoslovak Communist party and as such they were required to take the following oath

I swear that I shall always work for the interest of the working class and implement the policy of the Czechoslovak Communist Party. [...] I shall teach [the children] respect for the working class and the Czechoslovak Communist Party. I shall educate them in the spirit of Marxist-Leninist worldview. [...] I am aware of the consequences that I shall face, if I fail to stand by this oath (Slib vychovneho pracovnika, 1971).3

The “indoctrination” of teachers — or, put more mildly, their alignment with the goals and worldviews of the communist regime — took place during their studies at teacher training institutions, mainly the pedagogical faculties. Teachers: “were to become an ideological tool of the regime,” and thus already during entrance exams: “in addition to checking the candidates’ level of knowledge and personal attitude to the official ideology, applicants’ (absence of) religious beliefs were checked” (Zounek et al., 2017, 485). But teachers were also to be reaffirmed in their socialist beliefs in institutions of lifelong training and in-service training.

Therefore, in the name of de-monopolization and de-ideologization of the system in the early 1990s, pedagogical universities (and all others) received wide autonomy and the institutional system for continuing (in-service) training of teachers was abolished (Kotasek et al., 2004, 3). But in-service training of teachers was highly necessary, especially for instructors of civics and history classes. The transformation of the education system did not only cope with questions regarding what to teach and how to teach it, but also who would teach. Given the former regimes’ emphasis on the ideological alignment of teachers with communist and socialist creeds, “[m]any old instructors were loyal Communists. Should they turn 180° [and teach civics in the completely new socio-political system]?” (Klicperova-Baker, 2008, 166). So, not only did civics classes need

3 The oath was required during the so-called normalization period following the invasion of Warsaw Pact forces in Czechoslovakia in 1968. For full text of oath (in Czech) see http://www.moderni-dejiny.cz/clanek/slib-vychovneho-pracovnika-z-roku-1971/.
new textbooks, teaching methods and personnel, but also programs of in-service training, where teachers would be instructed on how to cope with the new material and pass on the “new” knowledge to students. In the first decade after the revolution, studies revealed that, for example, 20% of high school civics teachers taught the subject against their will (because they had it assigned), 28% were not fully qualified to teach the classes and only about 41% of the teachers took part in some form of in-service training (organized by non-governmental organizations) during that crucial period (CERMAT, 2002; Klicperova-Baker, 2008, 166).

5. The deficiencies of Czech education

Despite the reform process and its attempts to “deconstruct” the former system, certain mechanisms and methods within Czech schools and their curricula still reflect some aspects of the education system that had existed in the former regime. Parents and specialists in education, for example, draw attention to the fact that schooling still prefers memorization of facts and raw data at the expense of the development of critical thinking, contextualization, open debate and individual analysis (Trachtova, 2015). In transnational comparisons, Czech students are considered to be less capable to defend their views and are less confident in presenting them. This is largely a legacy of the “authoritarian education” that often punished creative and enterprising students and those who challenged authority (Vanek and Mücke, 2016, 90).

A cross-national survey conducted in 2001 by The International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) of “Civic Knowledge and Engagement” of children at age fourteen shows that surveyed Czech pupils (who at the time had experienced education only in the reformed post-revolution system) lagged behind their US, Italian, Finnish or Greek counterparts in “civic knowledge” scores, but fared better than other post-communist states, such as Romania, Latvia or the Russian Federation (Torney-Purta et al., 2001, 63). Czech students, however, demonstrated less satisfactory results in areas regarding civic participation, trust in government and media, volunteering, and general conventional civic participation. This is perhaps connected to the observation that only mere 53% of Czech civics teachers believed that “teaching civic education makes a difference for students’ political and civic development,” compared to 99% in Latvia and Lithuania, 98% in Australia, Bulgaria, Finland and others (Torney-Purta et al., 2001, 63). At the time, 51% of the surveyed Czech teachers reported that most emphasis was placed on “transfer of knowledge”, while only 18% saw “critical thinking” as a centre of interest of the education system (Klicperova-Baker, 2008, 168).

In the 2009 survey (Czech Republic was unfortunately not surveyed in the 2016 study), the “content knowledge” of Czech students in civics decreased by 10%. Again, the survey demonstrated the lack of importance of “social-movement-related citizenship” and “conventional citizenship” for Czech students, who scored the lowest (38) on both accounts out of all countries observed (Schulz et al. 2010, 96). A general disinterest in politics (both in terms of being informed about political and social issues and in terms of deliberating with fellow students) and a low level of trust in civic institutions was also reiterated and significantly below average when compared to the rest of surveyed nations (Schulz et al., 2010, 106 and 118). Czech students also had the lowest score (44) in the category “students’ expected electoral participation as an adult” – significantly lower than countries such as Indonesia (53), Thailand (54), Guatemala (55) or Bulgaria (48) (Schulz et al. 2010, 144). Only 50% of the surveyed Czech students had “intentions to vote in national elections”, compared to 90% in Colombia, 94% in Guatemala or 88% in Lithuania (Schulz et al. 2010, 145). “Student participation in class activities” was also a category where Czech pupils fared the worst out of all and in “students’ perceptions of openness in classroom discussions” the Czech Republic was “significantly below average” (Schulz et al., 2010, 175–176).

One of the main problems connected to these results is that social sciences, that is, civics classes, social studies, history and others, in primary and secondary education are generally marginalized. This is partly due to the fact that after the revolution, civics was highly discredited and almost synonymous with totalitarian propaganda. Teachers were allegedly asked questions such as: “Are you teaching Civics? Excuse me, is that still being taught?” (Klicperova-Baker, 2008, 166). In addition, when compared to teachers around the globe, Czech teachers are less “proud of their profession” (35%, while international average is 60%), less content with their profession (40%; international average 52%), less enthusiastic about their profession (29%, international average 56%) and only 38% of them find value and meaning in what they do, as opposed to 64% in the international average (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study, PIRLS, 2016, 30). This disaffection among teachers is partly connected to these results is that social sciences, that is, civics classes, social studies, history and others, in primary and secondary education are generally marginalized. This is partly due to the fact that after the revolution, civics was highly discredited and almost synonymous with totalitarian propaganda. Teachers were allegedly asked questions such as: “Are you teaching Civics? Excuse me, is that still being taught?” (Klicperova-Baker, 2008, 166). In addition, when compared to teachers around the globe, Czech teachers are less “proud of their profession” (35%, while international average is 60%), less content with their profession (40%; international average 52%), less enthusiastic about their profession (29%, international average 56%) and only 38% of them find value and meaning in what they do, as opposed to 64% in the international average (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study, PIRLS, 2016, 30). This disaffection among teachers is partly
a result of their instrumentalized role during communism, whereby society lost respect for the profession, which is struggling to regain it.

In terms of history classes, there is a reluctance to teach politically sensitive topics and as is often the case, teachers dwell on non-controversial historical subjects such as ancient Rome, religious reformation or the Peace of Westphalia and contemporary history is discussed only in the very last weeks before graduation exams. Students thereby often do not even come close to discussing the interpretations of the history that is most consequential for their lives. Czech students thus often leave secondary schooling institutions without having a coherent understanding of communism or the Velvet Revolution and not knowing much about the workings of the democratic political system.11 It must be noted, though, that the allocation of teaching hours spent with contemporary history is steadily increasing (Trachtova, 2016). In terms of economic literacy and their basic understanding of the functions of the capitalist market economy, the students also know little — a practical understandings of issues such as mortgages and interest rates are something the new adults have to cope with without much information background acquired in schools (Ceska Televize, 2010; Financni skupina Ceske Sporitelny, 2016).

As contemporary democratic politics becomes increasingly complex and technical, well-informed voting becomes more difficult and demanding for an individual citizen. Deliberation becomes all the more a building block of the democratic process and with the advent of social media, voters’ critical evaluation and processing of received information turns out to be crucial. In a democratizing society, if the educational system is not fully committed to raising democratic citizens,12 the system starts to lag behind the demands of new institutions. Following similar logic, for example, the chairman of the Czech Supreme court recently mentioned that the society is “not yet ready for direct democracy” (Dragoun, 2017).

6. Conclusion

Although this text may sound like a plea for social engineering, it is not intended as one. The simple message of this article is to state that it is difficult to make a democracy work and consolidate it, if the citizens are not provided with a “map of navigation” that will facilitate their life in a political and economic system based on the individual responsibility for oneself and implicitly also for others. In other words, coping with responsibility is easier once you are prepared to take it on and know its basic contours. The institution that can (and should) provide this “map” is primary and secondary education.

The transformations in the CEE countries have quite successfully focused on the economic transformation of their systems, on the political transformation of their institutions and on the transformation of their military apparatuses. Less room was however left to systematically focus on the transformation of the individual citizen from a “homo sovieticus” to a “homo democraticus”. While the transformation of institutions may lock-in the democratic form of governance and market economy from a medium-term perspective, it is the individual citizen and his or her understanding and satisfaction with the merits of “freedom as individual responsibility” that holds the ultimate power in sustaining and consolidating democracy. Education — especially civics — is without doubt a facilitator in providing these understandings for an individual.

As this analysis has demonstrated, the democratization of the structure and substance of the educational system was one of the goals of the transformation process in the Czech Republic after 1989. The transformation of the education system did take place, albeit being pushed rather from the bottom-up and without a strategic vision on the part of the political elites. The initial phase of education reform in the early 1990s was characterized by a process of deconstruction of the previous system under the banner of de-monopolization and de-ideologization. A systematic reform was rather incremental and very slow and partially to be blamed on the same political parties and members of parliament who simply lacked interest. Still today, non-governmental organizations criticize Czech governments for overlooking education and failing to adopt a longer-term vision of its development (EDUin, 2017a). Through the de-monopolization and de-ideologization process, structures that the state apparatus used to indoctrinate teachers, impose curricula and monitor school outputs was disassembled. Schools received significant autonomy, nearly unparalleled in other OECD countries. Through decentralization, a national curriculum was replaced with general guidelines and individual principals and teachers gained freedoms to choose textbooks, methods and adopt the curriculum. These changes were obviously most felt by teachers in social sciences and humanities, where the Marxist-Leninist Weltanschauung completely lost its position of primacy and was replaced by the liberal-democratic worldview.

The paradox that ensued from this reform process in the Czech Republic can be juxtaposed with the above-described Böckenförde dilemma, that is, the claim that the liberal democratic state “lives by prerequisites which it cannot guarantee itself” (Böckenförde, 1976, 60). To fulfill the prerequisites of a liberal society, the educational system was cut loose from rigid state control, but in turn the democratic state lost a significant portion of control over the structure and substance of education, of which the goal was (and is) to foster future generations of democrats — that is, the actors who decide about its future existence. While the communist system commandingly engaged in developing a “homo sovieticus” out of each citizen, the liberal democratic system lacks the means, and even the legitimacy, to develop the “homo democraticus” through its educational system. By imposing liberal ideals as the sole truthful paradigm, it would deny its own democratic ontology.

11 This should not be considered as a generalizing claim. Given the high level of decentralization and autonomy of Czech schools, the level of knowledge differs significantly based on individual schools and even teachers.

12 By “democratic citizens” we mean not only citizens that are tolerant toward views of others and have the ability to deliberate and critically evaluate information, but also citizens that understand the basics of democratic governance and market economics.


