

## LANGUAGE MINORITY EDUCATION IN CROATIA: CURRENT ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

© Ana BLAŽEVIĆ  
(University of Zagreb, Zagreb, Croatia)

[ablazevi@ffzg.hr](mailto:ablazevi@ffzg.hr)

*The Croatian policy for national minorities is based on democratic values developed in relevant United Nations' instruments for human rights protection, as well as conventions and recommendations of the Council of Europe addressing human rights, which Croatia has ratified. The article provides an overview of those documents but also of domestic legal framework which guarantee the right to education in the language and script of national minorities. In the development of the Croatian education system, national minorities are recognized as a key priority and a target group, and have been offered the specific educational programs in the form of three basic models of education following the standards of efficiency and quality in education. The author considers this minority education policy and analyses its realization level based on recent numerical data, state taken measures and related reports. Considering the overview of previous international reports and recommendations, the author examines the issues of certain segments within the overall education system in detail and suggests possible solutions and challenges for the realization of a more efficient educational process in the language and script of national minorities.*

**Keywords:** national minorities, minority policy, system of education, minority education, international agreements.

### Minority Policy

According to The Constitution of the Republic of Croatia (1990), the national minority members are entitled to enjoy all the human rights guaranteed by the legal system of the country they live in. Therefore the countries ought to create conditions that will enable the national minority members to develop their own culture by keeping their religion, tradition and customs. These individuals have to be able to use their own language in public and private sphere of life, and should be allowed to use it when communicating with the state government. We can talk about these natural conditions only once these minority members are enabled to take part in the decision making, especially when it comes down to the decisions relating to preservation of their own diversity, such as the education in their own language, as well as the usage of the language and writing in private and public life (Petričušić, 2005).

Though after almost twenty years of democracy in Croatia, the exercise of the rights of Croatia's national minorities should be analyzed and discussed in order to get a broad picture of their practice but also all current issues and challenges. It can be said that since 2000, when the change of the party in power happened, "major steps in the protection of the rights of national minorities were made which led to the creation and the implementation of the minority policy" (Tatalović, 2006: 45). That was the real beginning of the integration of the national minorities into the Croatian society as well as the preservation of their national identities.

According to the official census from 2001, there are 22 minority groups registered in Croatia. The biggest are the Serbs with 201 631 members, or 4.54% of the Croatian population, while all the others are under 0.5%. Relatively speaking, numerous are the Bosniacs – 20 755 or 0.5%, followed by the Italians – 19 636 or 0.4%, the Hungarians – 16 595 or 0.4%, Albanians – 15 082 or 0.3%, the Czechs – 10 510 or 0.2% (data from The Central Bureau of Statistics [www.dzs.hr](http://www.dzs.hr)). The normative regulation and the enforcement of registered national minority members' rights is one of the social democratization markers of the Republic of Croatia and an indicator of its readiness to join the European Union. Within the framework of Croatian legislature, this can be observed through four aspects: that of the cultural autonomy, the mother tongue speaking and writing education, proportional participation in state and local government, and across the border collaboration of the national minority groups (Tatalović, 2001: 97). This paper covers the aspect concerning the minority language speaking and writing education.

There was a total of 10 261 national minority language and letters pupils/students in the education system in 2008. Out of these, 4 425 were model A elementary school pupils in 43 schools, with 311 class groups and 758 national minority teachers. In 13 high schools there were 1 707 students, with 140 class groups and 404 teachers. In the B model in both elementary and high school there were 66 students, in one elementary (the Hungarian national minority) and one high school (the Czech minority), with 5 class groups and 13 teachers. In the C model there were 2 289 pupils in 71 elementary schools, with 250 groups and 84 teachers, and 7 high school students in one high school with one teacher (the Hungarian national minority). In 2007 there were 3 628 Roma national minority members in the educational system (from preschool to higher education). Looking closer at the minority proportions, most students were Serbian (4 094), then Roma (3 628), Italian (3 061), Hungarian (1 241), Czech (959), and Slovakian (510). Less than a hundred students represented the rest.

By voting in *The Law on Education in Languages and Letters of National Minorities* in 2000 (NN 51/00), and *The Constitutional Law on the Rights of the National Minorities* in 2002 (NN 155/02), the national minority rights to education in their own language and letters was regulated. By ratifying the basic international documents concerning the national minorities, such as *The Framework Convention on the Minority Protection* and *The European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages* in 1997, the basis for their implementation was widened even further.

*The UN Convention against Discrimination in Education*, *The UN Declaration on the Persons Belonging National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities*, *The Framework Convention on Protection of the National Minority Rights*, *The European Charter on Regional or Minority Languages* as well as *The Hague Recommendation regarding the Education Rights of National Minorities* are only some of the international documents mentioned. This document selection is proof of right to education being a

basic human right and freedom, and a practical expression of a society of equality (Horvat, 2009). Some of these documents, furthermore, envision the implementation control mechanisms, meaning the committee of experts going over periodic reports submitted by the parties. Based on these, they are to produce reports with suggestions for preparation of the recommendation for the Council of Europe Committee of Ministers, which are then to be directed back to the parties themselves (Tomić, 2000).

## System of Education

The System of Education in the Republic of Croatia consists of pre-school education, eight-year elementary education, secondary and higher education. Preschool education encompasses education and care of the children of preschool age, realized through educational, health care, nourishment and social care programs for children from six months of age until school age. Eight-year elementary education in the Republic of Croatia is compulsory and free for all children between the ages of six and fifteen. Following elementary education, secondary education enables everyone, under equal terms and according to one's capabilities, to acquire knowledge and skills required for work or continuation of education. According to the implemented curriculum, secondary schools are divided into:

- a) gymnasiums (general or specialized) perform a curriculum, lasting at least 4 years; after graduation, pupils acquire general qualifications
- b) vocational schools (technical, industrial, craft and others) perform a curriculum, lasting from one to five years; after graduation, pupils acquire professional secondary school qualifications if graduating after finishing only 1- or 2-year-curricula
- c) art schools (specializing in music, dance, fine arts and other) perform a curriculum, lasting at least 4 years; after graduation, pupils acquire a professional secondary qualification.

Higher education is implemented at universities or professional studies. University studies are offered only at universities whereas professional studies are offered at polytechnics or school of professional higher education and only in specific cases as a part of university studies. Quality higher education is a precondition for a successful society. Therefore, one of the main tasks of the Croatian Ministry of Science, Education and Sports is care for the creation of an intellectual nucleus which would implement this important task with the assistance of Croatian universities.

In June 2007 National Programme of Measures for the Introduction of Compulsory Secondary Education (2007) campaign was launched throughout Croatia. The national programme defines measures and activities aimed at increasing the number of secondary school pupils as well as by creating the conditions necessary to increase the number of pupils who acquire secondary qualifications and also conditions that would allow greater social inclusion of young people with special needs, behavior disorders and without family support, as well as young people with physical disabilities, creating conditions for better and more harmonious co-operation between the fields of education and work, and also creating conditions favorable to lifelong learning. The national programme, supported both by parents and pupils and scientific and professional circles, is in line with one of the fundamental goals of the Republic of Croatia, defined under the Strategic Development Framework for the period 2006-2013.

Some of the above mentioned goals were: increasing the rate of enrolment into and of finishing regular secondary education, improving the

quality of the Croatian secondary education and coordinating it with the European educational systems, ensuring the possibilities for a life-long learning in line with the needs of the modern life and economy, connecting with the new model of adult education, reducing the rate of early school leaving through the process of advancing the educational system. Pursuant to those goals, schools were supplied with free textbooks, transport costs were covered and free accommodation and meals at student dormitories were provided.

The result of the measures is that despite a negative demographic trend, 1,440 pupils more enroll into high school compared to those who finish elementary school. Data on enrolments into the first grade of elementary school show that the number of pupils who enrolled into high school was in 2007 and 2008 higher than the number of pupils who finished elementary school. Based on this, a conclusion can be drawn that, in addition to the pupils regularly finishing elementary school, a large number of pupils who finished elementary school in the previous years decided to continue their schooling (Ministry of Science, Education and Sports of the Republic of Croatia <http://public.mzos.hr/Default.aspx?art=9443&sec=2504>).

Parallel with these measures, 55 new teaching plans and programmes for the acquisition of lower educational qualification have been passed, the hiring of teachers and expert associates at high schools has been increased (349 were employed in the school year of 2006/2007, while 476 new teachers were employed in 2007/2008). Both the vertical and horizontal passableness through the educational system has been enabled, i.e. transition from a higher to a lower level, and vice versa. The State Pedagogical Standard has been created, aimed at setting up equal staff and material conditions in all high schools, and the enactment of the National Framework Curriculum is underway.

An integral part of the regular educational system of the Republic of Croatia is also the education of national minorities.

## Minority Education Policy

Current national minority members' education policy in the Republic of Croatia could be characterized as constantly improving in implementing the minority rights. In terms of legally regulating it, Croatia has reached a high level of normative assumption. There is a satisfying framework for fulfillment of the minority members' rights, based on integration and in collaboration with the system's institutions and the minority NGOs. The problems, however, appear in their implementation, which are attributed mainly to inadequate training level and lack of interest of the institutions in charge, as well as of the local governing bodies and self-governing bodies of areas where the national minorities live.

Since education in national minority language and letters is an integral part of the education system itself, the basic documents of the aforementioned legal framework are related to this segment of educational system as well. More precisely, the national minority members have the opportunity to be educated in their own mother tongue at all levels of educational system, from preschool to high education, under the terms and in the way described in *The Law on Education in Language and Letters of National Minorities*, as well as in the other regulations concerning education.

According to *The European Charter on Regional or Minority Languages*<sup>1</sup>, as well as to *The Decision on Ratifying The European Charter on Regional or Minority Languages*, the schooling languages can be divided in two groups: so called regional or minority languages, and non-regional minority languages. Regional or minority schooling languages are: Italian, Serbian, Hungarian, Czech, Slovakian, Ruthenian, Ukrainian, while the non-regional minority languages in one of the regular or special forms of education are German, Macedonian, Montenegrin, Bosnian, Roma, Hebrew, and Albanian.<sup>2</sup>

The national minority members take advantage of their constitutional right to education in their own language and letters within three basic models and special education forms, ensured by the Ministry of Science, Education and Sports and in accordance with the above said Law, and in collaboration with the national minority representatives. We are talking about three models of organization and education practice in the national minority languages:

- a) Model A – entire education/teaching in the language and letters of national minorities, with compulsory learning of Croatian language over the same number of hours as the minority language study. This model of education is practiced either in separate school institutions with the entire education being in the minority language or in special departments within the institutions with the Croatian language education. The Italian, Serbian, Hungarian and Czech minority is being taught according to this model.
- b) Model B – bilingual education, so that the natural sciences education is in Croatian, while the humanities classes are in the minority language. This model is practiced in special departments of the Croatian language school institutions, and is used by Hungarian, Czech and Serbian national minority.
- c) Model C – the minority language and culture education, in which, along with the regular education in Croatian, the education of the national minority language and culture is practiced in the minority language in duration of two to five school hours a week, and encompasses studying the national minority language and literature, geography, history, music and art. Within this model the Albanian, Czech, Hungarian, Macedonian, Austrian/German, Serbian, Ruthenian, Slovakian, Slovenian and Ukrainian minority is taught.

Special forms of schooling (summer and winter schools, correspondence and consultative schooling, remote learning etc) are organized primarily for those minorities or students unable to partake in the regular schooling within the A, B or C model (for example because of being dispersed). There is also a possibility of learning the national minority language as a language of an environment.

The national minority members propose and choose the model and program in accordance with the existing laws, and according to the students' interests and their own personnel capabilities for realizing the program. As was mentioned before, the curriculum and the regular education plan in model A, B and C are brought by the Ministry of Science, Education and Sports after consulting the minority NGOs in accordance to the article 6 of *The Law of Education in Language and Letters of National Minorities*<sup>3</sup>. At the same time, the Ministry provides the financial means for the educational programs and national minority language and letters schooling, such as:

---

<sup>1</sup> The European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages  
<http://www.pravosudje.hr/default.asp?gl=200908250000004>

<sup>2</sup> The Third State Report of the Republic of Croatia on the Application of The Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, 2008, Government of the Republic of Croatia, Zagreb.

<sup>3</sup> The Croatian Law of Education in Language and Letters of National Minorities, Narodne novine, 51/2000

translation programs, language editing, correction and printing of textbooks, manuals and books, summer and winter school programs, correspondence and consultative schooling, remote learning, special programs for Romas, grants for high school and university students, scholarships, programs for seminars and teacher improvement, and preschool programs.<sup>4</sup>

There is a visible if slow growth of the number of students in languages and letters of national minorities within the education system (from preschool to higher education institutions). In 2008 there was a total of 10 261 students in 159 institutions and 824 class groups and 1 296 educators/teachers, while in 2007 there was a total of 10 056 students. We already mentioned the significant investment in the educational programs in the languages and letters of national minorities, and a significant progress has been made in coordination of pedagogical documentation, textbook translation and printing, passing national exams in minority languages, and, connected to that, the catalogues of exam questions. Furthermore, the work of expert Committees has been intensified in producing the educational programs for education in languages and letters of national minorities, and their coordination with the Croatian National Educational Standard. Minority language advisors have been employed, county and inter-county committees for teachers' professional advancement have been founded, there are regular study programs in original nations' countries, and the procedure has been started for introducing professional exams for teachers and educators in minority languages. Among other things, in a special category of the National Roma Program there is also a preschool co-financing for Roma children, grants for pupils and students, training of teaching assistants<sup>5</sup> (in 2007 there were 23 teaching assistants employed), as well as the preparation courses for university. Since there are no specific educational or schooling forms within the framework of the regular school system for Roma national minority (specific educational plans and programs, subjects, textbooks, Roma language curriculum), it is necessary to start as well as to implement the process of its conceptualization, in a gradual, measured and precise way (Hrvatić, 2000). Furthermore, positive moves have been made by realizing the necessary conditions for schooling all children without separating them in different shifts. Thus the conditions have been set for inter-ethnic cooperation and dialogue, especially in areas once war zones, as well as for introduction of the term of intercultural education for all students<sup>6</sup>. It is exactly with these steps, even when declarative, that we can talk about minority affirmation which entails not only the separate minority education, but interculturalism in general education for all students.

All of the above testifies to the continued effort for quality improvement of education in national minority languages and letters. However, in spite of the achieved high level of normative rights, there is a need for additional measures as well as need for removal of irregularities of incomplete implementation of the said rights in actual practice. Some of them have been pointed out by the Advising Committee for the Framework Convention on Minority Rights Protection of the Council of Europe, which, when evaluating the legislative framework for minority language education,

---

<sup>4</sup> In 2006 The Ministry of Science, Education and Sports provided 5, and in 2007 almost 9 millions of Kunas for educational programs and education in languages and letters of national minorities.

<sup>5</sup> The report of MSEandS on realizing the National Roma Program for 2004, 2005, 2006, Committee for Supervising the Realization of National Roma Program

<sup>6</sup> Experts from decisions and conclusions of the 24th Assembly of the National Minority Council, Sep 21st, 2007

concluded that "in Croatian legal system there is a certain level of legal uncertainty when talking about conditions and procedures ensuring implementation of educational model envisioned by the said legal framework, additionally worsened by disagreements of jurisdiction of state, county or township bodies in charge of such schools". At the same time, a Committee on Supervision and Evaluation of implementation of the European Charter on Regional or Minority Languages is encouraging the Croatian government to improve the elementary education in Slovakian, Ruthenian and Ukrainian language, and to introduce these languages to high school education. Representatives of national minorities furthermore point out the current problems such as: unclear procedure and jurisdiction for founding and registering special school institutions with minority language and letters curriculum (Mikić, 2006), lack of regulations for teachers' duties, inadequate coordination of the educational plans and programs with the Croatian National Educational Standard, slowness of producing the curriculum programs for high schools, inadequate presence of cultural minority content in educational plans (Močinić, 2006), lack of adequate textbooks especially for high school education (which are still, with the Ministry's permission, being brought in from original countries), almost absurd vagueness about later introduction of an environmental language in comparison to foreign languages (in the Republic of Croatia only Italian minority studies its own language as environmental, starting from the second grade, while studying foreign language from the first), inadequate teachers' level of education (teachers were themselves students of Czech programs), lack or dying out of chairs for minority languages (a fault in part of educational system), vagueness of double major professional advancement, dislocation of institutions, problem of schools not being registered as minority language and letters schools, as well as necessary need to widen the education model to Roma language as well.<sup>7</sup>

## Conclusion

If we again look back at the Republic of Croatia's Constitution, which says that ethnic and multicultural diversity contribute to development of the Republic, it is clear that in the said process the key area is exactly the area of education as one of the telling examples of diversity. In other words, realizing the right to education in one's mother tongue is one of the most important factors in affirmation of languages, preservation of national minority members' identity, as well as an overall contribution to development of the Republic of Croatia.<sup>8</sup> Based on current measures, models, numerical data and reports, a report was given on the example of national minority members' inclusion in the system of education, and the most pressing problems of educational policy were recognized, consulting the views and recommendations of international institutions. In Croatia these are above else the implementation of the model C and its inclusion in regular schooling plan and program, the insufficient efficacy of the correspondence model of teaching, still insufficient investments into provision of textbooks, the lack of assumption for introducing the study of Ruthenian, Ukrainian and

---

<sup>7</sup> Some of the national minority notes of the round table discussion: „Education in Language and Letters of National Minorities of Republic of Croatia“ that took place on Nov 17th, 2009, and was organized by The Office for National Minorities, The Office for Human Rights and The Ministry of Science, Education and Sports.

<sup>8</sup> The Hague recommendations on national minority right to education  
[http://www.osce.org/documents/hcnm/1996/10/2700\\_hr.pdf](http://www.osce.org/documents/hcnm/1996/10/2700_hr.pdf)

Serbian language in universities and higher education institutions, the complication and slowness of recognizing the university diplomas from third countries (especially in Italy), as well as insufficient personnel capacity. The priority of future intentions of Croatian educational policy of the national minorities members should be in deeper articulation of schooling programs, at elementary and high school level, with the emphasis on technical and professional programs for all minorities. Positive moves are to be encouraged in regards to teachers' professional advancement, as well as to the higher degree of understanding minority demands in terms of setting up classes for a small number of pupils. The policy of printing and translating small edition textbooks while offering wide selection of them and changing them with every curriculum and program is to be revised, most probably from the ground up. In view of all this, we can conclude that the legal framework in Croatia is at a satisfying level. However, regardless of good will and solid standards, educational models are to be developed further so that they don't remain merely a proof of readiness to join European integrations, but instead, the country's clear statement on supporting the idea of modern multicultural Croatian society, from the very ground – i.e. the education system – up.

## References

- HORVAT, A. (2009): Segregacijom do integracije. *Zbornik radova Pravnog fakulteta u Splitu* 46, 2, pp. 443-472.
- HRVATIĆ, N. (2000): Odgoj i izobrazba Roma u Hrvatskoj. *Društvena istraživanja*, 9, 2-3, pp. 267-290.
- Monitoring the Application of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages: State Reports, Evaluations, Committee of Experts' Evaluation Report and Committee of Ministers' Recommendation  
[http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/education/minlang/Report/default\\_en.asp#Croatia](http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/education/minlang/Report/default_en.asp#Croatia)  
[15.06.2010]
- Monitoring the Application of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities: State Reports, Opinions, Comments and Resolutions  
[http://www.coe.int/t/dghl/monitoring/minorities/3\\_FCNMdocs/Table\\_en.asp#Croatia](http://www.coe.int/t/dghl/monitoring/minorities/3_FCNMdocs/Table_en.asp#Croatia)  
[15.06.2010]
- MIKIĆ, LJ. (2006): Ostvarivanje prava na obrazovanje pripadnika nacionalnih manjina na materinskom jeziku i pismu u istočnoj Hrvatskoj.  
<http://www.center4peace.org/Various%20document%20for%20web/Web%20materijali%20septembar%202006/MRP%20Paper%20/Doc%20hrvatski%202.pdf>  
[31.7.2009]
- National Programme of Measures for the Introduction of Compulsory Secondary Education (2007), *Official Gazette* NN, 71/07
- PETRIČUŠIĆ, A. (2005): Važnost sudjelovanja nacionalnih manjina u javnom životu: primjena međunarodnih standarda u Republici Hrvatskoj i Južnom Tirolu. In: Žagar, M. et al. (Ed.): *Manjine i europske integracije*. Split: Stina d.o.o., pp. 54-69.
- TATALOVIĆ, S. (2001): Nacionalne manjine u Republici Hrvatskoj. *Politička misao* 38, 3, pp. 95-105.
- TATALOVIĆ, S. (2006): National Minorities and Croatian Democracy. *Politička misao* 43, 5, pp. 45-59.
- The Constitution of the Republic of Croatia (1990), *Official Gazette*, 56/90
- TOMIĆ, S. (2000): Nacionalne manjine i europske integracije. *Politička misao* 37, 2, pp. 123-128.