

# Research

## Living together, learning together

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### Policy brief

This policy brief is based on a study conducted by Network of Education Policy Centres in two types of schools – schools with a programme in Croatian (majority) and schools with a programme in Serbian language and script in the Vukovar-Srijem County. For the sake of comparison, the attitudes of teachers and students in Italian minority schools and Croatian majority schools in Istria county were also measured, as well as the attitudes of Croatian majority school teachers and students in Zagreb. The purpose of the study has been to identify the attitudes towards participation in education and public life with the other group, and the attitudes towards the cultural and historical aspects of the curriculum in Croatian and Serbian language schools in the Vukovar-Srijem County, as well as wider implications of minority education in Croatia.

### Legal framework for the education of national minorities in Croatia

National minorities in Croatia have the right to be educated in their own language and script. This right is stated in the Constitution of the Republic of Croatia, the Constitutional Act on the Rights of

National Minorities and in the Law on Education in the Language and Script of National Minorities.

The legal framework for minority education defines the right of minority students to be educated in their own language and script at all levels of education – pre-school, primary, secondary and at higher education level. This right can be realised through three models of minority education:

- MODEL A – classes in the language and script of the national minority, i.e. all subjects are taught in the language of the national minority, with the exception of Croatian language.
- MODEL B – bilingual classes, i.e. Natural Sciences are taught in Croatian and according to the general curriculum, while Social Sciences are taught in the language of the minority, presumably for students who are members of that minority.
- MODEL C – nurturing language and culture, where content relating to the minority's identity is taught in the minority language in the form of additional classes, in duration of 2 to 5 school hours per week, including minority language, literature, geography, history, music and arts.



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Although the legal framework allows for 3 different models for the education of minorities, some of the models, such as Model B, are hardly used, and not at all used in the areas where most national minority students are concentrated – Istria County and Vukovar-Srijem County.

Most of the schools with classes in the minority language, where such education was implemented before the proclamation of the Croatian state in the 1990s, for example, the Italian schools in Istria County, have the legal status of a minority school. However, schools with a programme in Serbian language and script in Vukovar-Srijem County do not have the same status. This means that they have a status of a regular school that either a) implements the classes entirely in Serbian language and script or b) implements classes according to model A in Serbian language and script and parallelly implements the school program in Croatian language and script, organised in different shifts and/or spaces. The second arrangement in practice constitutes two schools under one roof, with very little interaction and no joint learning activities for students of the Serbian and Croatian programmes.

The schools in Serbian language and script in Vukovar-Srijem County are seeking registration as Serbian minority schools, based on the Erdut Agreement and the Croatian Government's Letter of Intent on the Peaceful Reintegration of the Croatian Danube Region (1997) where the right "to prepare and implement the educational program that fosters national identity, history and legacy, if it does not harm any right or benefits in regards of international educational standards and Croatian laws" is guaranteed to the members of the Serbian minority, as well as to other minorities. However, so far, the legal situation of schools in Serbian language and script in Vukovar has not been resolved. Unclear legal framework leaves space for non-transparent and inconsistent interpretations.

## Findings of the study:

### Students' attitudes towards the minority's role in the life of the wider community

The research shows that there are significant differences in attitude between two types of schools in Vukovar-Srijem County and, to a lesser extent, among the Croatian and Italian schools in Istria, regarding the role of minority, its representatives and its culture in the life of the wider community:

- The need to consult national minorities before making political decisions is perceived in negative terms by 28% of the students in Croatian schools in Vukovar-Srijem County, with many others saying they are undecided, but not supporting the point. The students attending minority language programmes in Vukovar-Srijem County and also in Istria County tend to agree strongly that the opinion of all ethnic groups in society should be taken into consideration when making important political decisions.
- About 28% of the students in Croatian schools in Vukovar-Srijem also disagree or strongly disagree with the notion that it is good to have politicians from national minorities in government. The majority of the students in Croatian schools in the region are 'undecided' on this point. The students in Serbian language schools in Vukovar overwhelmingly support this thesis with 87% of them agreeing and strongly agreeing that it is good to have minority politicians in the government. The same percentage of approval was shown by the students of Italian schools in Istria.
- While most students in the Serbian language programmes consider the minority language and culture important for a successful professional career, their peers in Croatian language programmes tend to think it is less important.

## The paradox of endorsing separate schooling

Attitudes towards the possibility of Serbian and Croatian students' joint education reveal a paradoxical attitude among ethnic majority students in Vukovar-Srijem County.

Students in the Croatian language programmes from Vukovar-Srijem County are particularly sceptical about the need for minority schools, and the students in Serbian language programmes are, for the most part, convinced that such schools are necessary. At the same time, however, the readiness of the students in Croatian language programmes from Vukovar-Srijem County to study in the same class with students from the Serbian language programme is lower than that of the students in Croatian schools in Zagreb or those in Croatian language programmes in Istria. In other words, students in Croatian schools in Vukovar disapprove of schools for the Serbian minority, but they are not overwhelmingly prepared to study in the same class with Serbian students. The readiness of Serbian students in Vukovar to study in the same class with their Croatian peers is in fact somewhat higher than the other way around.

The opinion of teachers about the existence of minority schools is somewhat polarised in Vukovar, with teachers in the Serbian language programmes finding it for the most part very good and teachers in the Croatian language programmes being much more reserved, though not overwhelmingly finding it bad. However, the idea of a hypothetical joint schooling of Croatian and Serbian students is perceived as a threat to the cultural identity of Serbian students by teachers in the Serbian language programmes.

There is relatively little support across all groups of teachers for the idea that joint schooling would create a more unified nation of citizens in Croatia, with teachers from Zagreb tending to support this thesis somewhat more than others.

The study also shows that a rather small percentage of teachers in Croatia have so far participated in trainings to improve their intercultural skills (22% of teachers in schools teaching in minority language as compared to 31% in schools teaching in Croatian language).

## History teaching

More than 30% of students from schools in Serbian language in Vukovar-Srijem disagree with the notion that the representation of minority and majority history in Croatian history textbooks is balanced and fair, and more than 40% of them are uncertain whether it is fair. Also a substantial percentage of students from schools in Croatian language in Vukovar-Srijem are uncertain about the fairness of the history curriculum.

Teachers in Serbian language programmes are mentioned more often as communicating to their students that the history of their group was different from the one described in textbooks. 33% of students in Serbian language programmes report this happening often or almost always, and altogether 86% of them have indicated that their teachers have shown some degree of disapproval of the official history curriculum and reacted by correcting its message. Both the teachers in Croatian and Serbian language programmes in Vukovar-Srijem are distinctly more ready to articulate a dissenting opinion on what is written in the history textbook (if they consider it unbalanced) than teachers in other regions.

History, especially recent history, creates serious tensions among teachers, students and parents of from Croatian and Serbian language programmes in Vukovar. Current representations of recent local history are seen by the stakeholders from the Serbian language programmes as exclusive. In focus groups, parents have stated that there have been conflicts between Serbian and Croatian programme schools over commemoration events related to the War of 1991-1995.

## Recommendations

1. The gap in the legal regulation of the status of minority schools vs. schools with classes in minority languages should urgently be overcome through a clear definition of minority schools, as well as through clarification of the conditions and the procedure necessary for becoming such a school.
2. **National and local governments, as well as the minority and other civil society organisations in Vukovar-Srijem County should monitor the impact of the existing models of minority schooling on the students' chances of future participation in the life of the community**, which includes the right to academic and professional development, finding a job and political participation.
3. Taking into account the deep social division between Croats and Serbs in the Vukovar-Srijem County and the fact that the model A is the one that is being implemented in all cases for the Serbian minority in the region, space must be created for innovative projects and models that promote integration and interethnic communication in formal education, even if they do not strictly follow any of the existing models of minority education and even if they challenge them or, possibly, upgrade them. In view of the significance of finding solutions for schooling that would combine respect for and possibility to explore majority and minority culture and history with the emphasis on cooperation, integration and participation across ethnic boundaries, **we recommend that the local authorities of the Vukovar-Srijem County in cooperation with national education authorities should seek support** from the Council of Europe and international organisations represented in the region for creating a **Fund for instituting innovative community school projects explicitly aimed at interethnic understanding and participation by all members of the community**. This fund could support the development of new school models, creating spaces for interaction and mutual learning, and could also support joint activities by existing majority and minority schools, provided that the underlying concept of these activities is based on the understanding of intercultural learning and not on a simple, perfunctory mingling of two groups.
4. Teacher training in intercultural education should be provided in order to empower teachers to deal with interethnic issues and with the complex legacy of the past. This training should be more accessible and can be provided by experts from organisations of both formal and non-formal education. **Providing in-service training in intercultural education methods for teachers from both majority and minority schools is especially significant for educators in the Vukovar-Srijem County.**
5. Parts of the general curriculum related to the minorities' history and culture should be clarified and made accessible to all interested parties via websites of the Ministry of Education and local education authorities. Non-transparent and unclear ways of defining this curriculum not only leaves space for non-transparent and controversial ways of teaching its content, but they also send a message to the public that minority content is something that should be generally hidden, denied or ignored, and not something that, in the long run, should be included into the majority curriculum as well.



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