pedocs
Open Access Erziehungswissenschaften

DIPF

Kopecký, Martin; Šerák, Michal

Adult education and democracy in Czechia and Slovakia. Discontinuities, policies, and civic challenges

Schemmann, Michael [Hrsg.]: Liberal democracies under pressure and consequences for adult education. Bielefeld : wbv Publikation 2026, S. 31-49. - (Internationales Jahrbuch der Erwachsenenbildung; 49)

Quellenangabe/ Reference:
Kopecký, Martin; Šerák, Michal: Adult education and democracy in Czechia and Slovakia. Discontinuities, policies, and civic challenges - In: Schemmann, Michael [Hrsg.]: Liberal democracies under pressure and consequences for adult education. Bielefeld : wbv Publikation 2026, S. 31-49 - URN: urn:nbn:de:0111-pedocs-367766 - DOI: 10.25656/01:36776; 10.3278/i80123w003

https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0111-pedocs-367766
https://doi.org/10.25656/01:36776

in Kooperation mit / in cooperation with:

wbv Publikation

http://www.wbv.de

Nutzungsbedingungen

Dieses Dokument steht unter folgender Creative Commons-Lizenz: http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/deed.de - Sie dürfen das Werk bzw. den Inhalt vervielfältigen, verbreiten und öffentlich zugänglich machen sowie Abwandlungen und Bearbeitungen des Werkes bzw. Inhaltes anfertigen, solange Sie den Namen des Autors/Rechteinhabers in der von ihm festgelegten Weise nennen.
Mit der Verwendung dieses Dokuments erkennen Sie die Nutzungsbedingungen an.

Terms of use

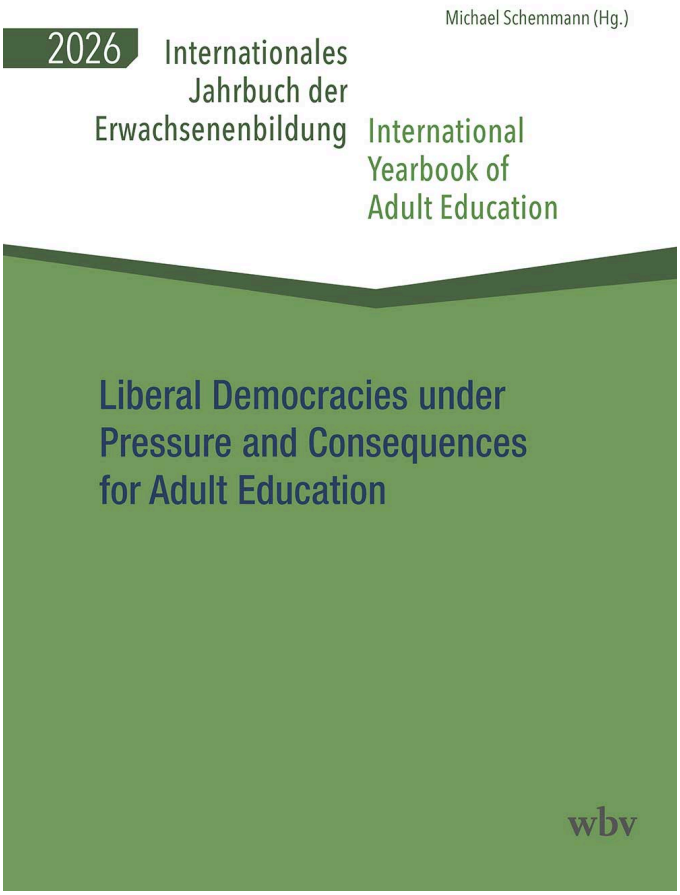
This document is published under following Creative Commons-License: http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/deed.en - You may copy, distribute and render this document accessible, make adaptations of this work or its contents accessible to the public as long as you attribute the work in the manner specified by the author or licensor.

By using this particular document, you accept the above-stated conditions of use.

Kontakt / Contact:

peDOCS
DIPF | Leibniz-Institut für Bildungsforschung und Bildungsinformation
Informationszentrum (IZ) Bildung
E-Mail: pedocs@dipf.de
Internet: www.pedocs.de

Mitglied der Leibniz-Gemeinschaft



E-Journal Einzelbeitrag
von: Martin Kopecký,Michal Šerák

Adult Education and Democracy in Czechia and Slovakia: Discontinuities, Policies, and Civic Challenges

aus: Internationales Jahrbuch der Erwachsenenbildung / International Yearbook of Adult Education 2026
(9783763980123)
Erscheinungsjahr: 2026
Seiten: 31 - 49
DOI: 10.3278/I80123W003

The article focuses on the relationship between adult education and democratic development in Czechia and Slovakia after 1989. It argues that, despite the prominence of lifelong learning in policy discourse, adult education has remained a marginal area, particularly in its civic dimension. Drawing on a historically informed and comparative perspective, the analysis highlights discontinuities between earlier traditions of civic-oriented adult education and current developments. In Czechia, adult education has lost institutional coherence and is largely framed by economic priorities. In Slovakia, a more comprehensive legislative framework has been established, yet participation remains limited and socially uneven. The article situates these trends within processes of depoliticisation and the weakening of civil society. It concludes that the democratic potential of adult education depends less on participation rates than on its content, goals, and social embeddedness.

Schlagworte: Czechia; Slovakia; education policy; democracy; adult education; citizenship education
Zitiervorschlag: *Kopecký, Martin & Šerák, Michal (2026). Adult Education and Democracy in Czechia and Slovakia: Discontinuities, Policies, and Civic Challenges. In: Internationales Jahrbuch der Erwachsenenbildung 2026. Liberal Democracies under Pressure and Consequences for Adult Education, S. 31-49. Bielefeld: wbv Publikation. https://doi.org/10.3278/I80123W003*

Adult Education and Democracy in Czechia and Slovakia: Discontinuities, Policies, and Civic Challenges

Martin Kopecký & Michal Šerák

Abstract: The article focuses on the relationship between adult education and democratic development in Czechia and Slovakia after 1989. It argues that, despite the prominence of lifelong learning in policy discourse, adult education has remained a marginal area, particularly in its civic dimension. Drawing on a historically informed and comparative perspective, the analysis highlights discontinuities between earlier traditions of civic-oriented adult education and current developments. In Czechia, adult education has lost institutional coherence and is largely framed by economic priorities. In Slovakia, a more comprehensive legislative framework has been established, yet participation remains limited and socially uneven. The article situates these trends within processes of depoliticisation and the weakening of civil society. It concludes that the democratic potential of adult education depends less on participation rates than on its content, goals, and social embeddedness.

Keywords: Czechia, Slovakia, education policy, democracy, adult education, citizenship education

1 Introduction

This article draws on arguments informed by both theoretical and empirical research. This is because problems such as the relationship between society and education are not fully amenable to empirical investigation, not only because of their complexity. An equally important reason is the necessity to deal with values and to reflect, from moral and political perspectives, on particular conceptions of the good – whether we understand this as the very idea of education or associate it with other selected goods. No less significant is the inevitable presence of a certain degree of speculation when engaging in critical reflection on what does not exist but could (or should) exist, or on what exists but could (or should) be otherwise. It may be argued that in times of crisis such an approach is not only more demanding than usual, but also more necessary.

Addressing adult education in Czech and Slovak society in the context of the current crisis of democracy, is a relatively demanding task. We enter a space in which only partial and somewhat dated points of reference are available for the chosen line of inquiry. This makes the task more stimulating, placing demands on imagination and

critical thinking, including self-reflexivity in the sense of an awareness of the limits of the conclusions offered. To abandon this ambition would mean failing to attempt to fill a gap that calls for attention.

The text addresses Czechia and Slovakia, countries that were united within a single state for most of the twentieth century (1918–1992), although the attention is not distributed evenly between them. We are familiar – at least we believe so – with the Czech situation, and we consider our internal knowledge sufficient to offer both a detailed account and a critical assessment of societal developments. In the case of Slovakia's development since the 1990s, our approach is less detailed and more descriptive. We focus primarily on education policy, while leaving the dimension of broader social critique underdeveloped.

The article first outlines the broader approach to citizenship employed here, understood as a learned and evolving role. It then introduces the Czech case, which is contextualised through selected aspects of earlier history both before and after the establishment of Czechoslovakia. The main emphasis is placed on developments since the 1990s. Issues specific to Slovakia are subsequently discussed within the broader comparison of Czech and Slovak developments over recent decades.

2 Adult education and citizenship as a role

A defining feature of the present era, on a global scale, is a sense of unrest, or even chaos, accompanied by polarization and fragility (OECD, 2025). Such an atmosphere might be expected to foster a desire for learning as a means of achieving better orientation in a changing world. Yet successful learning is, in several fundamental respects, not self-evident – at least when we speak of forms of learning that bring benefit to individuals, support their freedom, and contribute to progress. Honneth (2011), points out that, human learning constitutes a pathway through which progress is realised as a cognitive process. However, this can only occur under certain social conditions. The historical realisation of reason is thus dependent on public conditions.

Adult education can be approached in a variety of ways. Some of these perspectives are optimistic in their belief that, under certain conditions, education can contribute to improving society. A typical proponent of such views has for decades been UNESCO (among others 2020, 2021). Its ambition extends broadly along two dimensions. The first concerns the wide range of areas in which a positive role is attributed to adult education. The second lies in its universalism, understood as an interest in all macro-regions, countries, communities, and individuals. Within this perspective, a better world is possible also through adult education and learning. Such thinking extends even to issues such as global climate change and its social implications.

Advocates of these maximalist expectations are aware that their visions are not easily realised and depend both on the contributions of educational actors themselves and on the broader environment. Nevertheless, they display a certain persistence, maintaining an idealistic stance despite the current state of the world (Milana, 2024).

This article seeks to avoid an a priori belief in the capacity of adult education to transform the world for the better, while at the same time retaining a certain degree of idealism. We are convinced that adult education is not a panacea for societal problems, just as it is not a solution to economic problems – despite how it has often been framed by neoliberal approaches (Jarvis, 2008). However, it may contribute to positive change in areas such as health and well-being, employment, and social, civic, and community life (UNESCO, 2016).

It is through this cautious rather than sceptical lens that the recent development of adult education in Czechia and Slovakia is examined within a broader European and, in certain respects, global context. One important motif will be that of discontinuity. By this we mean that realities that once existed may be abandoned and forgotten, instead of serving – after critical updating – as a source of inspiration. Longue durée is not the rule in the field of adult education. Another motif will be the emphasis on education and learning as phenomena that can and should be supported by education policy, but which, in situations where policy fails to provide adequate measures, must draw on other sources, such as bottom-up initiatives emerging from civil society.

All of this is intended primarily to illuminate one particular role of adult education – namely, broadly conceived civic education. We understand civic education as enabling individuals to adopt an active approach to the practice of democratic citizenship. It strengthens individuals' ability to orient themselves within society, fosters social bonds, and enables them to participate in social change in ways that allow them to exercise greater control over their own lifes in response to shared problems. It may focus on knowledge as well as skills, but the dimension of values is no less important. Indeed any adult education worthy of the name should foster empowerment and emancipation (Zafiris, 2022).

Democracy here denotes much more than a mere set of formal rules. It is understood in a stronger sense – as an ideal mode of relating to others, grounded in sharing, dialogue, and cooperation.

3 The Case of Czechia

3.1 Civic Culture, National Identity, and the Czech Democratic Tradition

In 2005, a television competition involving public voting entitled *The Greatest Czech* took place. Leaving aside the question of the meaningfulness of such a project, we may focus solely on its results. These may reveal something important about the self-understanding of the Czech population. First place was awarded to Charles IV., emperor, whose greatest achievements include the founding of the oldest university in Central Europe. He was followed by Tomáš G. Masaryk, a politician, founder and first president of independent Czechoslovakia, originally a philosopher and sociologist. Next came Václav Havel, president of Czechoslovakia and subsequently of the Czech Republic, originally a playwright and thinker, who may be seen, after Masaryk, as a continuation of the ideal of the intellectual as head of state. Another figure in the ranking was

Comenius, a religious thinker, writer, and above all an educator, an advocate of universal access to education and one of the pioneers of the idea of lifelong education.

Yet the point may also be found elsewhere. The competition most likely had a different winner (no official data have been provided by the organisers). This was Jára Cimrman, a fictional Czech polymath allegedly living at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This figure emerged as an explicit mystification in the late 1960s. Comedic theatre plays (purportedly Cimrman's dramas) gained enormous popularity, especially from the 1980s onwards, also thanks to their audio recordings, and effectively became part of popular culture. Many lines from these plays have entered common awareness and are used as references in the everyday language of several generations.

This anecdotal story can be interpreted in various ways. It may be read as an expression of disdain for competitions of this kind, with their pathos and at the same time misplaced competitiveness; or as an expression of a capacity for self-irony; or even as an indication of a sense of uncertainty, inadequacy, and the absence of genuine role models among historical figures. Such an ambivalent feeling may be a luxury, or perhaps a dysfunction, but in any case, it is characteristic of the post-heroic period. The absence of belief in any form of "grand narrative" as a mass phenomenon stands in contrast to the search for and development of collective identities in earlier phases of modern society.

Modern adult education in the Czech context, as elsewhere in Europe (Pöggeler, 1990), emerged from below. Its primary sources were social changes and the associated social conflicts, to which an emerging civil society responded. The main social movements determined the direction of development, as captured at the end of the nineteenth century by Schauer, who summarised the diagnosis of the time as two major questions – the national question and the social question (Menclová et al., 2000). Both were the subject of long and intense conflicts, mobilising a vast range of activities within the gradually emerging civil society, including educational activities.

Within the scope of this text, there is only limited space for a historical reconstruction of earlier stages of adult education that may help to illuminate the discontinuities of development in the second half of the twentieth century. Our point of reference will be the approach of Masaryk mentioned above. The reason is not that history is written (in the sense of interpreted) by the victors – here the founders of the new Czechoslovak state, one of the successors of Austria-Hungary – but rather that this approach very strongly shaped the guiding idea of Czech adult education until roughly the mid-twentieth century. This is because it is rooted in a political philosophy that represented the most influential current of Czech political thought and that, to some extent, also influenced the thinking of Václav Havel.

Among the key elements of this approach is the idea of *small-scale civic work*. Under conditions that are not conducive to regular political activity (here in the context of the only partially democratic Austro-Hungarian monarchy), it is nevertheless possible to engage in politics. There exists a space for activities that may fulfil a political role in a broader sense for example, improving living conditions at the local level, supporting emancipation, and fostering mutuality. Typical examples of small-scale civic work in-

clude adult education activities such as organising public debates, publishing educational materials, and similar forms of engagement. So-called *non-political politics* expands the notion of the political and partially compensates for the shortcomings of the existing political system. It turns toward the sphere of everyday life. For this perspective, democracy goes far beyond formal procedures; it is closely connected with interpersonal relations and the solving of practical problems.

This conception may be compared to the approaches of Dewey or Habermas (Šimsa, 2004), as both thinkers placed strong emphasis on cultivating a public sphere within which an active citizenry could emerge and flourish. The foundation of democracy as a way of life is understood as the capacity for discussion. Within such discussion, based on openness, equality, and mutual recognition, interpersonal relations are constituted within communities.

Education, including self-education, also occupies an important position in Masaryk's political thought. Influenced in part by the Protestant tradition, Masaryk (most concisely 1926 [1898]) developed the motif of work not only as an obligation but also as a source of self-formation. Through working on one's life project – one that is oriented toward others – we become better individuals. To live and work toward attainable goals is more meaningful than to sacrifice oneself for unattainable ones.

3.2 Adult Education and Democratic Citizenship in Interwar Czechoslovakia

The education policy of the new state addressed the issue of adult education from the very beginning. The state played an active role, particularly in the 1920s. In the following decade, however, adult education as a priority was significantly overshadowed by crises – first economic and soon thereafter (international) political. Nevertheless, it can be argued that interwar Czechoslovakia belonged to a minority of European countries for which adult education was a priority embraced by virtually all major political parties. Adult education, originally driven by a wide range of civil society actors, thus became, to some extent, a matter of state interest.

Attention may be drawn to the existence of the *Act on Civic Education Courses* adopted in 1919. This legislation established free courses in civic education aimed at providing the population with basic orientation in matters related to the functioning of the state, civic rights and duties, democracy, and national identity. Its adoption reflected the conviction of political elites that the state could not function without an active and informed citizenry – a view that was explicitly articulated in contemporary materials as the need to prevent political illiteracy among the population (Pokorný, 2003; Holman, 1968). The intention was both to strengthen the democratic character of the newly established state and to contribute to greater cohesion within an otherwise markedly ethnically and socially diverse population.

Alongside the state-supported network of local educational centres, there existed a broad spectrum of associative, professional, and political educational activities that retained a considerable degree of autonomy (Škoda, 1972). At the same time, the limitations of state policy gradually became apparent. Insufficient financial resources, reliance on voluntary work, and a lack of qualified personnel meant that the system was

unable to fully realise its ambitions (Škoda, 1972; Holman, 1968). The limited reach of educational activities, particularly in rural areas, further pointed to persistent social inequalities in access to education.

3.3 Post-1989 Transformation and the Erosion of Civic Educational Perspectives

With the end of the Cold War, the question emerged as to whether, and if so in what precise sense, it was possible to build upon earlier developments of the state prior to the mid-twentieth century. Interwar Czechoslovakia became, in many respects, the most natural reference framework. This, however, occurred largely only at the level of declarations, without a genuine effort to draw inspiration from the substantive elements of the thinking of that time. This also applied to the spirit of the republican approach to democracy and to the deliberate cultivation of a democratic way of life and the associated modes of learning. In other words, political culture in the broader sense developed along a different trajectory, shaped by several main factors, some of which stemmed from global societal trends and others from locally embedded causes.

According to Habermas (as cited in Buden, 2013), the revolutions of 1989 were hardly more than *catch-up* revolutions. They were not future-oriented in any substantial sense. Rather, their dynamic was directed toward embracing the existing model of liberal democracy and capitalism as practised in the West, or more precisely, toward removing the barriers that prevented accession to the Western political, economic, and institutional framework. Although this interpretation may be regarded as somewhat generalising, it fits the Czech case rather well. For a considerable period after 1989, Czech political discourse was shaped by notions such as a "standard democracy" and a "standard market economy."

At the same time, the prevailing atmosphere in the West was marked by a lack of interest in reforms that would transcend the mainstream trajectory of development. A defining feature of the period became the now well-known and widely criticised argument about *the end of history* by Fukuyama (2002 [1992]).

One of the first major responses to this analysis came from Derrida (1994) in *Specters of Marx*, where he sought to demonstrate that while regimes identifying themselves with Marxism had collapsed, the crises that Marx addressed had by no means disappeared.

Another prominent political thinker of the period, Dahrendorf (1991), argued that the transformation of post-communist countries into democracies and market economies would need to unfold in three waves of differing duration. The shortest would be the moment for constitutional lawyers, followed by a longer phase for economists, and finally the longest period, which Dahrendorf (1991) expected to be devoted to the development of civil society. Only this third phase was to constitute a reliable indicator of a successful transformation.

An attempt at a basic assessment within this trichotomy leads to a diagnosis of only partial and ambiguous success. The most successful dimension appears to have been the establishment of a functioning polity. In the remaining two dimensions, how-

ever, the results are at best contradictory. For anyone familiar with debates on the problematic effects of *neoliberalism*, it will be clear what we seek to convey if this concept is meant as a diagnosis.

In addition to economic inequalities and the insufficient development of the public sector, it is necessary to recall the effect of depoliticization – which is always only a pretended depoliticisation (as illustrated by the well-known principle that there are no alternatives to the market). Among other consequences, this strengthens the power of managers and, at the same time, suppresses the ethos of active citizenship. The image of society becomes shaped by the ideal of the free individual, whose position is determined by their capacity to perform. Economic and private life emerge as primary priorities, leaving the sphere of public life far behind. This is further reinforced by the rise of postmodernism in a version that promotes relativisation combined with scepticism toward politics. The citizen is thus increasingly conceived as a consumer. Freedom is predominantly understood in negative terms – as freedom from something, that is, as the absence of constraints and regulations (Berlin, 1999).

3.4 Social Inequalities and the Marginalisation of Civic Learning

Another reason for the relatively weak interest in adult education, and particularly in civic education within it, may be found in the socio-economic sphere and the cultural inequalities associated with it. According to a representative study from the end of the last decade (Prokop et al., 2019), Czech society is divided into five main social classes. None of these provides favourable conditions for the successful development of a relationship to adult education. Some lack sufficient economic capital, others cultural capital. This also applies to the so-called cosmopolitan class, which is perhaps best equipped to respond to contemporary social transformations. Although it possesses considerable cultural and social capital, some of its opportunities are significantly limited by a lack of economic capital.

Within the European Union (EU), Czechs spend an above-average amount of time in employment, yet their incomes remain relatively low. Two possible explanations for lower participation in education may be identified here. First, one may draw on (though not exclusively) a Marxist argument concerning free time and freedom – here understood as the freedom to engage in education during one's leisure time. Second, education may be viewed as an expense that limits the ability to satisfy other needs. However, the main problem in the Czech population's relationship to adult education lies in perceiving it as an externally imposed obligation, combined with the belief that it is unnecessary for the individual – many people feel that they do not face any significant deficits. As we can see, the perception of educational need framed in terms of deficits overshadows the understanding of education as an opportunity. The prevailing learning culture does not appear particularly encouraging for those who associate education with self-realisation.

The situation is similar when the Czech case is examined from a perspective emphasising the role of citizenship education. If we have identified discontinuity in political culture, it is not surprising to observe an inability – or more precisely, an unwilling-

ness – on the part of key actors to engage with citizenship education, with only minor exceptions. Civic competencies did not become a subject of state education policy in the 1990s, nor did they generate significant demand within civil society. The voice of experts was also weak in this regard; the expert community largely failed to articulate the issue and instead relegated it to the periphery of interest (Hartl et al., 1995).

3.5 Adult Education Policy, Civil Society, and Democratic Learning after EU Accession

If, in the 1990s and at the beginning of the twenty-first century, there existed a horizon toward which hopes could be directed, it was integration into international structures, above all the EU. The relationship of the Czech Republic to European adult education policy, which has undergone several phases, has been described elsewhere (Kopecký et al., 2024). From an initial euphoria at having found a firm political and civilisational anchor, development shifted toward the position of a "pupil" who, with a certain degree of diligence, sought to complete its "homework." However, after accession to the EU in 2004, this was followed by a period marked by a much more lukewarm approach, a loss of ambition, and a restriction to the necessary minimum. Adult education ceased to function as an innovative and inspiring element and instead became a topic located at the periphery. European and other international impulses remained the only significant driving forces. The inability to debate education policy within the national context, in a certain sense, indirectly blocks the capacity to make use even of otherwise productive European stimuli. If domestic actors fail to formulate diagnoses, articulate problems, and propose solutions within the national framework, European impulses enter a kind of vacuum – they have nothing to build upon and may therefore appear artificial or misaligned with the national situation. Where such asymmetry exists – where national policy is absent or only weakly developed – the hope placed in a stronger supranational actor may prove disappointing. It may be added that this is not an isolated experience; a similar trajectory can be observed, for instance, in Portugal (Antunes & Guimarães, 2014).

If we have noted the limited capacity to draw legitimacy or inspiration for civic education from the interaction between the Czech environment and the EU, it is worth asking how this relationship functions with other international organisations. The answer is relatively straightforward. The key organisations for the conceptualisation of citizenship adult education, UNESCO and Council of Europe, remain little known outside the academic sphere, and policymakers draw almost no inspiration from them.

In the field of education policy, the greatest affinity might be found with the OECD, though this does not appear to stem from a deliberate and systematic engagement with the organisation. Rather, the intersection lies in a lowest common denominator – namely, an emphasis on the individual and their performance (Beighton, 2026).

For Czechia, and indeed for post-communist Europe more broadly, a long-term weakness of civil society is characteristic (Howard, 2003). This becomes particularly apparent when we set aside engagement in interest-based organisations focused on

sport, culture, or health, and instead focus on political parties, trade unions, organisations concerned with minority rights, or environmental issues (Frič, 2016). The level of participation in volunteer activities is likewise relatively low, as shown by PIAAC research (Straková & Veselý, 2015).

We observe only limited space for social or environmental critique, or more broadly, for engagement with complex civilisational questions. There is only a very weak public debate on topics such as universal basic income, participatory budgeting, degrowth, or even sustainability in general.

The media also constitute part of the problem, as they are subject to trends of tabloidisation. Even in those cases where this is not the case, the theme of active citizenship resonates only weakly. Questions of democracy are typically framed historically within a liberal-conservative perspective on the dichotomy between democracy and totalitarianism in the twentieth century. Cultivated civic media reach only a limited audience. A specific phenomenon is the growing influence of disinformation.

The generally unfavourable conditions for the development of civic adult education are also likely rooted in prevailing value orientations. It appears that the neoliberal emphasis on the individual and competition is not solely a product of the post-Cold War period. According to Možný (2022), the rapid and surprisingly smooth collapse of communism in Czechoslovakia can be explained not only by the loss of credibility of the old regime due to its dysfunction, but also by general desire for change motivated by an interest in developing their forms of capital – something that the (at least declaratively) egalitarian, state-controlled society did not facilitate. This refers to the strengthening of economic, social, and cultural capital, understood in Bourdieu´s terms as forms of competition among individuals and families.

A striking and troubling finding is that, according to the European Social Survey (ESS), Czech society displays the lowest interest in tolerance and understanding toward close others among all the countries examined, and this holds across all educational groups (Pospíšilová & Krulichová, 2018). It is also worth noting the below-average level of trust in other people across social groups. Other studies, such as Prokop et al. (2019), similarly indicate that roughly two-thirds of the population subscribe to the view that individuals today must primarily look out for what is personally advantageous to them (Pospěch, 2021).

3.6 Adult Education between Employability and Democratic Citizenship

The transformations of adult education in Czechia after 1989 can be interpreted as part of a broader societal transformation, the basic contours of which were shaped by economic and institutional modernisation. In this context, adult education occupied a paradoxical position: while it was reconceptualised through the innovative framework of lifelong learning, it nevertheless remained only weakly anchored within state education policy. Scholarly analyses repeatedly point out that adult education in the Czech context represents a long-term marginal area of public policy, whose importance is declared in strategic documents but only limitedly reflected in concrete measures (Šerák, 2016; Kopecký et al., 2024).

Already in the early years after 1989, political discourse focused primarily on economic reform and integration into the global market, while questions of education and culture remained rather peripheral to political interest. Adult education was therefore understood mainly as an instrument of economic adaptation and of increasing the competitiveness of the labour force (Vymazal, 2002; Kopecký, 2014). This development corresponded to broader international trends associated with globalisation and the gradual promotion of the concept of lifelong learning.

The document *Strategy of Lifelong Learning of the Czech Republic*, approved by the government, represented the first attempt at a more systematic conceptual anchoring of this field. It defined lifelong learning as a principle of modern education policy and emphasised its importance for both economic development and social cohesion (MŠMT, 2007). Despite these ambitions, the strategy did not bring about a fundamental institutional change, and adult education remained dispersed across several sectoral policies. Similar conclusions are reached by international analyses of education policy, according to which this field in Czechia is characterised by relatively weak political priority and limited coordination among institutions (Kopecký et al., 2024).

Competences in the field of adult education are divided among several ministries, primarily the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports and the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs. In addition, regional governments, professional chambers, private providers, and non-profit organisations also participate in this field. The absence of a coordinating centre results in policies often being developed without broader interconnection (Šerák, 2016).

This institutional fragmentation has consequences for how adult education is conceptualised within political discourse. Adult education is often not understood as an autonomous area of education policy, but rather as an instrument for addressing other public problems, particularly unemployment or the shortage of qualified labour force. This approach leads to public institutions focusing primarily on vocational education and training, and retraining, while the broader social, cultural, and civic functions of adult education remain neglected.

The strong orientation toward vocational education is also reflected in the structure of educational activities among the adult population. Analyses based on Adult Education Survey data show that most adult learning activities in Czechia are related to work. Adult education is often primarily motivated by the needs of employers or pressures of the labour market, while the autonomous interest of individuals in education plays a smaller role (Kalenda et al., 2024; Simonová & Hamplová, 2016). Similar conclusions are also supported by international research on adult competencies, such as PIAAC, which shows that participation in education is strongly differentiated according to individuals' social status and level of educational attainment (OECD, 2024).

Another characteristic feature of current developments is the growing projectification of education policy. Many initiatives in the field of adult education are implemented within time-limited projects financed by European structural funds or other external sources. These projects often introduce innovative approaches or new institutional instruments. However, their long-term impact on the structure of the system

remains limited, as mechanisms for their systematic integration into public policy are often lacking once funding ends (Šerák, 2016). This phenomenon is not unique to the Czech Republic but is typical of many countries in Central and Eastern Europe, where EU funds constitute a major source of financing for educational activities.

A specific feature of the Czech context is also the relative absence of strong professional organisations or interest groups that would systematically advocate for the development of adult education within public policy. In many European countries, there exist professional associations of adult education providers or national institutions that actively participate in shaping education policy. In the Czech Republic, the influence of such actors remains weak, which further contributes to the already emphasised marginal position of adult education within political interest (Kopecký et al., 2024).

From a broader perspective, the current situation can be interpreted as a manifestation of a deeper tension between economic rationality and the wider societal functions of education. While policy documents primarily emphasise its importance for economic competitiveness and employability, questions of citizenship education, cultural participation, and the development of democratic society remain on the periphery of interest.

The situation described above can hardly be expected to be improved by recent global developments. Czech society does not stand aside from broader trends, and its less-than-favourable condition does not provide a solid foundation for coping, even relatively successfully, with the series of crises that have unfolded over the past two decades.

We are witnessing the development of advanced populism, whose rise is closely linked to the expansion of often uncultivated and accelerated communication in the virtual environment (though not exclusively there). Within this environment, topics associated with so-called culture wars have taken root, particularly those related to migration, feminism, the position of LGBTQ+ minorities, and environmental policy. Considerable scepticism is also evident toward the EU and toward the external world more generally.

Populist far-right politics, which in the present context (i. e. following the parliamentary elections of Autumn 2025) builds in some respects on earlier trends cultivated by the previous neoliberal government (such as the disregard for environmental issues), simultaneously develops its own version of a nationally oriented political project, clearly inspired by the idea of so-called illiberal democracy. At the time of finalising this text, a proposal for legislation concerning the supervision of NGOs receiving funding from abroad has begun to be discussed. Another indication of the near future is the current reduction of resources allocated to environmental education.

From the perspective of public policy, adult education oriented toward active citizenship in Czechia currently appears to be a largely defeated issue. However, there remains the sphere of learning that emerges from civic activities. An example may be the growing sensitivity to issues of gender, minority positions, or sustainability, at least among part of the so-called Generation Z. Nevertheless, the tendency toward post-ma-

terialist values, understood as an interest in goals beyond individual concerns, appears highly uncertain under conditions of increasing economic inequality.

4 The Slovak case and its comparison with Czechia

Slovak development after 1989 emerged from the same institutional and cultural-political tradition as the Czech case. Both countries entered the transformation period with a shared experience of state-directed educational activities, strong links between adult education and cultural policy, and the predominance of an institutional conception in which adult education was not understood as an autonomous area of public policy, but rather as part of a broader system of education, culture, the labour market, and social policy. The dissolution of the federation, however, gradually led to diverging developmental trajectories. While adult education in the Czech context became increasingly fragmented after 1989 and gradually lost a clearer institutional anchoring, the Slovak Republic attempted to build a relatively more systematic framework for lifelong learning and adult education (Šprlák 2016).

This difference is particularly visible at the legislative level. In the Czech Republic, adult education remains dispersed across several partial legal and policy frameworks, whereas Slovakia adopted separate legislation focused first on lifelong learning and later directly on adult education. For a long time, the key document was the *Act on Lifelong Learning* (2009), which regulated the accreditation of educational programmes, the status of providers of continuing education, the information system for continuing education, and certain mechanisms for the recognition of prior learning. In 2024, a new *Act on Adult Education* was adopted, replacing the previous legal framework and seeking to update it in relation to new labour market demands, digitalisation, the recognition of non-formal learning outcomes, and the introduction of individual learning accounts (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2026).

A similar difference can also be observed in the area of strategic governance. Slovakia adopted *the Strategy for Lifelong Learning and Guidance for the Period 2021–2030*, which represents a relatively comprehensive attempt to connect adult education, career guidance, the development of basic skills, the recognition of learning outcomes, and labour market needs (Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic, 2021). The strategy explicitly builds upon the European Agenda for Adult Learning and emphasises support for selected target groups, particularly low-qualified individuals, as well as the development of basic, transferable, digital, and civic skills (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2026). Compared to Czechia, the Slovak system is therefore formally more conceptually coherent and legislatively more clearly defined. This does not, however, necessarily mean that adult education occupies a stronger position within public policy. The Slovak approach is likewise strongly oriented toward employability, professional adaptation, and addressing skills mismatches (OECD, 2020).

The institutional structure of Slovak adult education is also somewhat clearer than in the Czech case. Alongside the Ministry of Education, important roles are played by institutions connected to employment policy, professional qualifications, sectoral councils, and employers' associations. A significant actor is *the Alliance of Sectoral Councils*, which connects employers, professional organisations, and educational institutions and participates in defining labour market needs. This structure strengthens the link between adult education and the economy and vocational education and training. At the same time, however, it confirms that the legitimation of adult education in Slovakia, similarly to Czechia, remains predominantly economic in character (OECD, 2020; Šprlák, 2016).

From the perspective of the content and functions of adult education, it is therefore possible to speak of both partial similarities and differences. The Czech situation is characterised by weak coordination, low political priority, and project-based financing. The Slovak situation, by contrast, is formally more institutionalised and legislatively more developed, yet in practice likewise subordinated to the politics of skills, employability, and competitiveness. In both countries, the broader humanistic, cultural, and civic functions of adult education remain less developed. The difference lies rather in the form of this weakness: in the Czech case, it is primarily institutional and conceptual weakness; in the Slovak case, it takes the form of tension between a relatively well-developed framework and the limited capacity of this framework to transform actual educational participation and learning culture (Desjardins, 2017; OECD, 2020).

This conclusion is further confirmed by data on adult participation in education. According to OECD analyses, the culture of adult learning in Slovakia remains insufficiently developed, adult participation in education is low, and those adults who would benefit most from further education participate the least (OECD, 2020). Data from the Adult Education Survey and related analyses show that participation in formal and non-formal education is socially differentiated: participation is higher among individuals with higher levels of educational attainment, more stable employment positions, higher qualifications, and stronger ties to employers (Lubyová et al., 2016; Šprlák, 2016). Low-qualified adults, older individuals, people outside the stable labour market, and persons with lower levels of basic skills remain substantially less involved.

The results of the international PIAAC survey further refine this picture. In some indicators of adult basic skills, Slovakia achieves results close to the OECD average, yet similarly to Czechia it faces the problem of unequal distribution of opportunities for further education (OECD, 2023). The relationship between skill levels and participation in education has a cumulative character: those with higher skill levels participate in education more frequently, whereas those who, from the perspective of public policy, might require support the most often remain outside educational provision. In this respect, the Slovak case confirms a broader problem characteristic of Central and Eastern Europe, where the mere existence of strategies and legal frameworks does not automatically lead to overcoming social barriers to participation (Bodewig & Hirshleifer, 2011; Desjardins, 2017).

A specific feature of Slovakia is the preservation of part of the tradition of culturally oriented adult education, which became less visible in the Czech environment after 1989. Cultural institutions, local and regional educational centres, and certain forms of community education have retained greater continuity there. Older as well as more recent Slovak literature shows that adult education in the domestic tradition was understood not only as vocational education, but also as a sphere of cultural, civic, and interest-based adult education (Hotár et al., 2000; Pavlov, 2015; Prusáková, 2005). This element could represent an important resource for a broader conception of adult education that would not be reduced solely to employability. In current education policy, however, this potential remains underutilised. Cultural and citizenship adult education continue to occupy a supplementary rather than foundational position within the system (EAEA, 2018).

From the perspective of civic adult education, the Slovak case is therefore ambivalent. On the one hand, compared to the Czech Republic, Slovakia possesses a clearer formal framework for the development of lifelong learning and adult education. On the other hand, this framework primarily responds to economic and qualification-related challenges rather than to questions of democratic culture, civic participation, social cohesion, or adults' capacity to orient themselves within complex social conflicts. In this sense, the Slovak situation converges with the Czech one. In both cases, civic adult education remains at the periphery of education policy, although this marginality emerges through different institutional trajectories.

The Slovak portrait should therefore not be interpreted as a simple opposite of the Czech case. More accurately, it may be understood as a case of a formally stronger yet substantively narrowly oriented system. The Czech Republic exhibits weak institutional coordination and low political priority of adult education. Slovakia possesses a more elaborated legal and strategic framework, yet this framework remains strongly labour-market oriented and has thus far failed to adequately reach those groups of adults most distant from education. In both countries, therefore, the potential of adult education as a space for democratic learning, emancipation, and civic participation remains unrealised.

5 Summary and conclusion

While the influence of society and politics on adult education is undoubtedly strong, the influence of adult education on democratic politics is difficult to verify in measurable terms. Nevertheless, this relationship cannot be reduced to mere wishful thinking or intuition.

What is likely to be decisive, however, is the specific form of education – its content, modes, and the nature of the environment in which it takes place. If any lesson emerges from the above discussion, it is the need to emphasise not only participation in education as such. What matters is the relationship between education and certain

values, and how it shapes individuals' relationships to themselves, to others, and to the surrounding world.

In times of complex problems, for example, the development of consumer literacy appears more necessary and beneficial than financial literacy. The former concept emphasises civic attitudes and the ability to influence the economic system, whereas the latter focuses on adaptation to the existing system and the acceptance of social risks. Similarly, critical information literacy represents a greater contribution to emancipation than narrowly focused courses aimed at identifying fake news. More general and long-term objectives that support broader competencies appear to constitute the kind of "school of democracy".

An inspiring perspective is offered by the philosopher Bělohradský (2025), who reflects on the kind of knowledge that is both highly desirable today and yet insufficiently present. Modern societies are characterised by a paradox: successful integration into the social system requires specialised knowledge, yet the functioning of society as a whole depends on the ability of each individual to take the broader whole into account in their decision-making. In this sense, we may observe the following: "In globalised capitalist societies, labour productivity depends on specialised knowledge, whereas the coordination of society as a whole depends on majority-oriented opinions; deepening the process of opinion formation, which deliberative democracy seeks to achieve, is therefore, in the age of technonihilism, a matter of the survival of democracy as a rational community of 'active citizens'" (Bělohradský 2025, p. 376).

In other words, contemporary societies have a vital need for processes of long-term and collective civic learning. This outlined objective is undoubtedly demanding, linked to an unfavourable starting situation and shaped by many factors, including public attitudes, the nature of the public sphere, and, not least, education policy.

6 References

Antunes, F. & Guimarães, P. (2014). Lifelong education and learning, societal project and competitive advantage: tensions and ambivalences in policy and planning of educational change in Portugal. *Globalisation, Societies and Education, 12*(1), p. 71–91. https://doi.org/10.1080/14767724.2013.858985

Beighton, C. (2026). Triangulating the lifelong learner: neuroliberalism and the OECD's focus on meta-cognition, affect, and wellbeing. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, p. 1–17. https://doi.org/10.1080/02601370.2025.2607387

Bělohradský. V. (2025). *Zaslepená společnost. Eseje z doby těsně před koncem*. Praha: Karolinum.

Berlin, I. (1999). *Čtyři eseje o svobodě*. Praha: Prostor.

Bodewig, C. & Hirshleifer, S. (2011). *Advancing adult learning in Eastern Europe and Central Asia*. World Bank. https://doi.org/10.1596/27347

Buden, B. (2013). *Konec postkomunismu. Od společnosti bez naděje k naději bez společnosti*. Praha: Rybka Publishers.

Dahrendorf, R. (1991). *Úvahy o revoluci v Evropě v dopise, který měl být zaslán jistému pánovi ve Varšavě*. Praha: ELK.

Derrida, J. (1994). *Specters of Marx*. London and New York: Routledge.

Desjardins, R. (2017). *Political economy of adult learning systems: Comparative study of strategies, policies and constraints*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA) (2018). *Adult education in Europe 2018: A civil society view*. Brussels: EAEA. https://eaea.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Country_Reports_2018_final.pdf

European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice. (2026). *National reforms related to adult education and training: Slovakia*. Eurydice. https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/eurypedia/slovakia/national-reforms-related-adult-education-and-training

Frič, P. (2016). *Občanský sektor v ohrožení?* Praha: Slon.

Fukuyama, F. (2002). *Konec dějin a poslední člověk*. Praha: Rybka Publishers.

Hartl, P., Štěpánek, Z., Reichel, J., Brejchová, D. (1995). K výsledkům delfské studie. Budoucnost vzdělávání dospělých v Evropě –Eurodephi ´95. In *Česká společnost pro vzdělávání dospělých, Ročenka vzdělávání dospělých* (pp. 15–18).

Holman, J. (1968). *Vývoj právní úpravy osvěty v Československu 1918–1966*. Praha: Krajské osvětové středisko.

Honneth, A. (2011). *Patologie rozumu. Dějiny a současnost kritické teorie*. Praha: Filosofia.

Hotár, V. S., Paška, P., & Perhács, J. (Eds.). (2000). Výchova a vzdelávanie dospelých – Andragogika: Terminologický a výkladový slovník. Slovenské pedagogické nakladateľstvo.

Howard, M. M. (2003). *The Weakness of Civil Society in Post-Communist Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Jarvis, P. (2008). *Democracy, Lifelong Learning and the Learning Society. Active Citizenship in a Late Moder Age*. London, New York: Routledge.

Kalenda, J., Kočvarová, I., Vaculíková, J. & Karger, T. (2024). Proměny účasti v dalším vzdělávání dospělých v České republice. Kdo se jej účastní a s jakými šancemi? *Czech Sociological Review, 60*(5), p. 561–586. https://doi.org/10.13060/csr.2024.039

Kopecký, M. (2014). Transnationalization of Czech adult education policy as glocalization of the world and European policy mainstream(s). *European Education*, *46*(4), p. 9–24. https://doi.org/10.1080/10564934.2014.995534

Kopecký, M., Šerák, M., & Sycha, M. (2024). Adult Education as a Weak Policy Priority in the Czech National Context. In M. Milana, P. Rasmussen & M. Bussi (Eds.), *Research Handbook on Adult Education Policy*, p. 300–315. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar. https://doi.org/10.4337/9781803925950.00031

Lubyová, M., Sodomová, E., & Karasová, K. (2016). Participation in lifelong learning in Slovakia revisited: Has anything changed recently? A comparison of 2007 and 2011 AES microdata results. In L. Hurbánková & M. Vojtková (Eds.), *Statistical methods in socio-economic research: Theory and applications* (pp. 66–86). Bratislava: ŠEVT.

Masaryk, T. G. (1926). *Jak pracovat?* Praha: Čin.

Menclová, V., Svozil, B., & Vaněk, V. (2000). *Slovník českých spisovatelů*. Praha: Libri.

Milana, M. (2024). Global challenges and adult learnings for better futures: some reflections. *Convergence. An International Adult Education Journal. 45*(1), p. 48–60.

Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic. (2021). *Strategy for lifelong learning and guidance 2021–2030*. https://zakladnezrucnosti.sk/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/EN_Strategia-CZVaP_fin.pdf

Možný, I. (2022). *Proč tak snadno: Některé rodinné důvody sametoví revoluce*. Praha: Karolinum.

MŠMT. (2007). *Strategy of lifelong learning in the Czech Republic*. https://msmt.gov.cz/uploads/Zalezitosti_EU/strategie_2007_EN_web_jednostrany.pdf

OECD. (2020). *OECD skills strategy Slovak Republic: Assessment and recommendations*. OECD Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1787/bb688e68-en

OECD. (2023). *Survey of adult skills 2023: Country note – Slovak Republic*. OECD Publishing. https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/survey-of-adults-skills-2023-country-notes_ab4f6b8c-en/slovak-republic_23a92628-en.html

OECD. (2024). *Survey of adult skills 2023: Česká republika*. OECD Publishing. https://www.oecd.org/cs/publications/2024/12/survey-of-adults-skills-2023-country-notes_df7b4a60/czechia_48f7166c.html

OECD. (2025). *States of Fragility 2025*. Paris: OECD Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1787/81982370-en

Pavlov, I. (2015). Súčasnosť a perspektívy teórie výchovy dospelých v sústave andragogických vied. *Lifelong Learning – celoživotní vzdělávání*, 5(1), p. 8–28.

Pöggeler, F. (1990). *The state and adult education*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang.

Pokorný, J. (2003*). Lidová výchova na přelomu 19. a 20. století*. Praha: Karolinum.

Pospěch, P. (2021). *Neznámá společnost. Pohledy na současné Česko*. Brno: Host.

Pospíšilová, J., & Krulichová, E. (2018). *Jak se žije Čechům v současné Evropě?* Praha: Academia.

Prokop, D., Tabery, P., Buchtík, M., Dvořák, T., & Pilnáček, M. (2019). *Rozděleni svobodou. Česká společnost po 30 letech*. Praha: Radioservis.

Prusáková, V. (2005). *Základy andragogiky I*. Bratislava: Gerlach.

Šerák, M. (2016). Historická reflexe vývoje pedagogiky dospělých a andragogiky v českých zemích. In M. Dvořáková & M. Šerák (Eds.), *Andragogika a vzdělávání dospělých: Vybrané kapitoly* (pp. 54–76). Praha: Filozofická fakulta Univerzity Karlovy.

Simonová, N., & Hamplová, D. (2016). Další vzdělávání dospělých v České republice – kdo se ho účastní a s jakými výsledky? *Czech Sociological Review, 52*(1), p. 3–25. https://doi.org/10.13060/00380288.2016.52.1.240

Šimsa, M. (2004). Masarykův a Habermasův pojem demokracie. In Hrubec, M. (Ed.), *Demokracie, veřejnost a občanská společnost* (pp. 135–146). Praha: Filosofia.

Škoda, K. (1972). *Příspěvky k dějinám české osvěty*. Praha: Ústav pro výzkum kultury.

Šprlák, T. (2016). Twenty-five years after: Rebuilding the lifelong learning system in the Czech and Slovak Republics: Progress, challenges and lessons learnt from a narrative research. *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling, 44*(4), p. 475–487. https://doi.org/10.1080/03069885.2016.1145195

Straková, J., & Veselý, A. (2015). Mezinárodní výzkum kompetencí dospělých PIAAC: Hlavní zjištění a implikace pro vzdělávací politiku. *Pedagogická orientace 24*(4), p. 509–527. https://doi.org/10.5817/PedOr2015-4-509

UNESCO. (2016). *3rd Global Report on Adult Learning and Education*. Hamburg: UNESCO.

UNESCO. (2020). *Humanistic futures of learning. Perspectives from UNESCO Chairs and UNITWIN Networks*. Paris: UNESCO.

UNESCO. (2021). *Reimagining our futures together. A new social contract for education*. Paris: UNESCO.

Vymazal, J. (2002). České vzdělávání dospělých ve světle tradice a při pohledu do budoucnosti. In Beneš, M. et al. (Eds.), *Idea vzdělávání v současné společnosti* (pp. 91–109). Praha: Eurolex Bohemia.

Zafiris, G. K. (2022). Rethinking adult education for active participatory citizenship and resistance in Europe. In L. Tett & M. Hamilton (Eds.), *Resisting Neoliberalism in Education. Local, National and Transnational Perspectives* (pp. 225–238) Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1332/policypress/9781447350057.003.0016

Funding

This publication was supported by the Cooperatio Programme, research area General Education and Pedagogy, implemented at the Faculty of Arts of Charles University.

Author

Martin Kopecký, Ph.D.
Martin Kopecký is an associated professor at the Department of Adult Education and Personnel Management at Faculty of Arts, Charles University in Prague (the Czech Republic) and Director of the Department. He has a Ph.D. (2004) from the Charles University (in adult education). He has courses in philosophy and sociology of (adult) education, education policy of international organizations and citizenship education. He focuses on the topic of the relationships between social changes and adult education. Member of ESREA.
ORCID: 0000-0002-2962-9123

Contact
Martin Kopecký
Department of Adult Education and Personnel Management
Charles University, Faculty of Arts
nám. Jana Palacha 1/2
116 38 Prague 1, Czech Republic
martin.kopecky@ff.cuni.cz

Author

Michal Šerák, Ph.D.
Michal Šerák is an assistant professor at the Department of Adult Education and Personnel Management at Faculty of Arts, Charles University in Prague (the Czech Republic). He has a Ph.D. (2005) from the Charles University (in adult education). Topics of his professional interest include older adult education, age management, adult education policy, history of adult education and andragogy, interest-based and citizenship adult education. He collaborates with several NGOs active in the field of (older) adult education. He is the main editor of the international edition Czech-Polish-Slovak Studies in Andragogy and Social Gerontology.
ORCID: 0000-0002-8052-567X

Contact
Michal Šerák
Department of Adult Education and Personnel Management
Charles University, Faculty of Arts
nám. Jana Palacha 1/2
116 38 Prague 1, Czech Republic
michal.serak@ff.cuni.cz