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Intercultural Competencies and Lifelong Learning of Teachers in the Republic of Croatia
Medkulturne kompetence in vseživljensko učenje učiteljev na Hrvaškem

Abstract: The starting point of this article is the complex European socio-cultural context, in which different cultures, customs, religions and worldviews meet but also clash. All of that extends into the educational environment, which is now facing intense challenges of multiculturalism. Schools are expected to enable students to live in a multicultural society, and that process includes the acquisition of intercultural competencies. In order for schools to successfully achieve this educational goal, they need to have quality teachers. In addition to basic education, teachers participate in continuing education – i.e. lifelong learning. The article analyses and evaluates the correlation between intercultural competencies and lifelong learning of teachers in the Republic of Croatia.

The first chapter discusses the intercultural competences of teachers as a European strategic educational goal within international qualifications. The second part explores, relying on the European guidelines and recommendations of the National Council for Education, the lifelong learning of teachers in the Republic of Croatia, which includes learning for the development of intercultural competencies. The third part is dedicated to the critical evaluation of intercultural competencies of religious education teachers with regard to initial education programmes and professional development programmes in the Republic of Croatia.

Keywords: interculturalism, teacher competencies, qualifications framework, lifelong learning, formation of religious education teachers

Povzetek: Izhodišče prispevka je kompleksen evropski družbeno-kulturni kontekst, v katerem se različne kulture, običaji, religije in svetovni nazori srečujejo in tudi spopadajo. Vse to posega tudi v izobraževalno okolje, ki se danes sooča z intenzivnimi izzivi večkulturnosti. Od šol se pričakuje, da bodo učencem omogočile življenje v večkulturni družbi, ta proces pa vključuje tudi pridobivanje medkulturnih kompetenc. Da bi šole ta učni cilj uspešno dosegle, potrebujejo kakovostne učitelje. Učitelji se poleg osnovnega izobraževanja zato udeležujejo tudi

stalnega doizobraževanja, tj. vseživljenjskega učenja. Prispevek analizira in ocenjuje povezavo med medkulturnimi kompetencami in vseživljenjskim učenjem učiteljev v republiki Hrvaški. Prvo poglavje obravnava medkulturne kompetence učiteljev kot evropski strateški izobraževalni cilj v okviru mednarodnih kvalifikacij. Drugo poglavje na podlagi evropskih smernic in priporočil Državnega sveta za izobraževanje raziskuje vseživljenjsko učenje hrvaških učiteljev, vključno z učenjem za razvoj medkulturnih kompetenc. Tretji del je posvečen kritičnemu vrednotenju medkulturnih kompetenc učiteljev verske vzgoje glede na programe začetnega izobraževanja in programe profesionalnega razvoja na Hrvaškem.

Ključne besede: medkulturnost, kompetence učiteljev, okvir kvalifikacij, vseživljenjsko učenje, formacija učiteljev verske vzgoje.

1. Introduction

In today's globalized world, the crisis manifests itself in various ways: through fear, marginalization, and the exclusion of the other and the different.[1] The phenomena of global terrorism and migration, which have produced fear on a global scale, particularly contribute to this. In Europe, as well as outside of it, we are witnessing the confrontation and conflicts of many diverse cultures, religions, and worldviews. There are no more homogeneous societies in Europe; they are heterogeneous and reflect different forms of tension, which arise from the fear of the other and the different. As Slavoj Žižek asserted, fear has become "the core principle of mobilisation in the contemporary society" (2008, 39). He believes that "political correctness represents a true example of a liberal form of politics of fear" (39). Analysing the society of late capitalism, Žižek concludes that the central human right in such a society is "the right not to be disturbed, therefore, the right to remain at a safe distance from others" (40). The Congregation for Catholic Education points out that "it is ironic how modern man has achieved important goals in knowing the forces of nature, science and technology and, at the same time, is lacking in ideas for adequate coexistence within society so as to give everyone an acceptable and dignified existence" (2018, no. 6). In line with that, Pope Benedict XVI updates the anthropological issue that requires an educational dimension, emphasizing that "a new trajectory of thinking is needed in order to arrive at a better understanding of the implications of our being one family; interaction among the peoples of the world calls us to embark upon this new trajectory, so that integration can signify solidarity rather than marginalization" (2010, no. 53).

In this type of social context, we can recognize the importance of discussions on interculturality. In this regard, the article focuses, among other things, on the following issues: To what extent is interculturalism present in lifelong learning programmes in the Republic of Croatia? Do initial learning programmes develop intercultural competences of religious education teachers in Croatia? What is spe

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cific about the educational system in Croatia? How does this affect lifelong learning and the practice of intercultural competences?

Cultural differences, as an important feature of European societies' identities, are at the same time a source of wealth and beauty, but also a generator of lasting tensions and conflicts. In order for the resource of wealth in diversity to become the source of coexistence in diversity, intercultural education is rather necessary. That is why the Congregation for Catholic Education appeals to the urgency of humanizing education, which means "putting the person at the centre of education, in a framework of relationships that make up a living community, which is interdependent and bound to a common destiny" (2018, no. 8). To be more precise, personal development without community and without love educates for egocentrism and egoism. Edgar Morin points out that unity is a treasure of human diversity, while the treasure of human unity is human diversity (2016, 69). Even in the first pages of the Bible, we come across the "creative diversity of the other. Diversity rests in creation, in God and his unconditional freedom." (Šarčević 2021, 45) For Ivan Šarčević, "the fundamental starting point for reconciliation is acceptance, respect and understanding of differences" (46). The Bible teaches us that all people, regardless of culture and religion, stand before their own freedom in which they can accept the other as wealth, as a gift of diversity or as a threat, danger, and impoverishment (46).

2. Intercultural Competences of Teachers

2.1 Intercultural Competences – Conceptual Meaning

In the extensive literature dealing with the issue of multiculturalism and interculturalism, we encounter different definitions of intercultural competences (Council of Europe 2012; Council of Europe 2014; Perotti 1994; Piršl and Diković 2012; Piršl et al. 2016). Fantini, for example, sees intercultural competences as "the ability to establish and maintain positive relationships, effective communication and cooperation among members of different cultures" (Buterin and Jagić 2013, 3). In understanding intercultural competence, the key concept is communication with other and different cultures, which includes getting to know, respect and understand them. Communication competence is an essential feature of intercultural competence. The literature mentions, as Marijana Bašić points out, different versions of the intercultural component of communication competence, among which the most common are intercultural communication competence and intercultural communication competence (2014, 56), which are related to multiculturalism and interculturalism.

According to Erika Nardon-Schmid, "intercultural competence is an essential qualification for anyone who works with subjects belonging to different cultural systems and it therefore represents an important 'international qualification'" (Fiorucci 2015, 61). According to Moosmüller, intercultural competence can be

acquired only if one possesses intercultural knowledge, which represents a kind of intercultural base as a starting point for successful interaction in specific situations (Nardon-Schmid 2000, 31). Erika Nardon-Schmid, referring to Bernard-Dietrich Müller, sees intercultural competence as the ability to establish intense communion (*communio*) (32).

When it comes to the matters of social cohesion in European society, it is particularly important to educate people, especially teachers and educators, who will be able to communicate with different cultures, traditions, customs, values, rituals, and different forms of life. The acquisition of intercultural competence requires continuous professional development and becomes an important part of a person's self-development. Massimiliano Fiorucci, discussing the migrant situation in Italy, warns that an important factor of intercultural education is actually intercultural dialogue in which the interlocutors are equal in everything. If this is not the case, then there are, as he points out, processes of subordinate integration or subordinate inclusion of emigrants (2015, 67). Therefore, he advocates the importance of co-education, in which the culture of emigrants would also be included. That implies a dialogic education that occurs through shared relationships based on equality, reciprocity, and responsibility (67–68). During the pandemic times, we could often hear that we needed to get used to the new normal. That is especially interesting when we take into consideration Fiorucci's ideas, as he points out that it is not possible to talk about integration if it is not aware of its fundamental goal: to give life to the new normal, and that is intercultural normality (68).

2.2 Intercultural Competencies of Teachers – European Strategic Educational Goal

Although we live in a globalizing culture, cultural differences remain strong, especially in terms of attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours. National and local cultures continue to retain and nurture their peculiarities in everyday life. Even the most developed societies have their own values, customs, behaviours, attitudes, eating habits, communication skills, celebrations, religious rites, cults, myths, fairy tales, short stories… The great migrations of the 1970s and 1980s, and especially migration in the last decade, have placed the issue of cultural diversity at the centre of attention. "In Europe, the immigration of foreigners disrupted the monocultural model." (Perotti 1994, 23) If we take into consideration the immigration at the end of the 20th century and add the current large migrations and emigration of non-European populations to it, it can be stated that Europe no longer consists of homogeneous societies, but multi-ethnic, multi-religious, multicultural societies. As Antonio Perotti points out, no culture is an intruder among European societies anymore. Thus, the attitude regarding the value and contribution of every culture in the construction of human civilization is a fundamental starting point for interculturalism (33).

Consequently, contemporary European schools are facing a number of challenges, especially those caused by migration and the growing number of immigrant

students in European schools. Therefore, the promotion of a culture of coexistence represents one of the more important challenges, as its development asks for intercultural education teacher training (Fiorucci 2015, 57). To the three traditional pillars of education, learning to know, learning to be, learning to do, Jacques Delors adds the fourth: learning to live together, learning to live with others (1998, 102–105). One of the fundamental tasks of education is to promote and educate students to "be aware of similarities between people and their interdependence" (104). As Bedeković and Zrilić point out, "educational institutions are becoming the meeting point of different ethnicities, languages, cultures, religions, and worldviews. The challenges of the future of the individual and society are reflected, among other things, in the structure and quality of educational systems" (2014, 112). There is no quality intercultural education without quality teachers who will be all the more competent after they acquire intercultural competencies. Intercultural education requires the identity of a teacher who will "perceive diversity as a value, who will have intercultural attitudes, intercultural knowledge and behaviours" (113). Teachers are expected to possess "intercultural intelligence that precedes the creation of competences" (Hercigonja 2017, 109).

An important starting point for teachers is the reconsideration of their own educational paradigm based on ethnocentrism. In European schools, integration is an actual daily process, in which employees and students from different cultural traditions participate. Intercultural education represents an important project in European schools. It "must inspire people's minds, stir their emotions and lend wings to their actions. Such a vision must be convincing in its theoretical foundation, appeal to practitioners, motivate them and support them in their daily work" (Council of Europe 2012, 7).

The implementation of intercultural education requires the quality basic and lifelong education of teachers and educators. Their professional development is faced with many problems because it depends on various factors: culture, social and societal context, type of school, teacher profile…

Massimiliano Fiorucci singles out four competencies that teachers should acquire:

- to learn and adopt the perspective of critical ethnocentrism;
- to adopt the perspective of cognitive, affective, and existential decentralization;
- to be aware of one's own role as an intercultural mediator, to learn how to mediate;
- to adopt intercultural competences. (2015, 59–61)

2.3 Intercultural Competencies of Teachers in regard to International Qualifications

Due to the constant variability and reforms of education systems in Europe, teachers encounter a number of difficulties on a daily basis: immigrant students, coexistence with different cultures, entering the world of new technologies, distrust in education policies, etc. On the other hand, "teacher education is a strategic node in the process of evaluating educational systems" (Raffaghalli 2008, 4). Fundamental and lifelong teacher education is an integral part of the school system.

Quality teachers guarantee quality education. This is especially true today when schools and education are exposed to constant changes and adjustments. This requires teachers to constantly develop themselves, seeking and acquiring new knowledge, skills, and competencies (6). Teachers' competencies are no longer focused only on the methodological and didactic area and the transfer of content; teachers are expected to greatly contribute to the education and shaping of the personalities of students, families, and society as a whole. These expectations and lasting changes require lifelong teacher education. There is a certain uniformity in Europe when it comes to fundamental teacher education (Bologna Process), yet the same cannot be said for their ongoing formation. Several recommendations of the Council of Europe (Making a European Area of Lifelong Learning a Reality 2001; European Union 2002; Adult learning it is never too late to learn 2006; It is always a good time to learn 2007; European Platform against Poverty and social exclusion 2010; Youth on the Move 2010; Council Recommendation on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning 2018; Key Competences for Lifelong Learning 2019) insist on lifelong learning. In that regard, the need for internationalization of teacher education was emphasized (Raffaghalli 2008, 13) – the creation of a common European educational area. Although the education of teachers in the European Union is the responsibility of each Member State, the complexity of European society increasingly highlights the need for a higher level of teacher education. In this regard, special attention is paid to teacher mobility in Europe. Sweden, for example, is one of the countries with the highest percentage of teacher mobility (7.3%), and in the last decade, the need for it has been accelerated due to the migration processes (Filipović 2017, 127–133).

In the descriptions of tendencies in the modern world, professional literature mentions several key terms that indicate a new "global socio-economic scenario" (Nardon-Schmid 2000, 29). Globalization, internationalization, mobility, dialogue, encounters, and relations occupy a special place among them (Council of Europe 2012, 13). An important imperative for mutual understanding is the need to adopt international qualifications aimed at educating for dialogue between peoples and cultures. Intercultural competence is central to the adoption of international qualifications. It is a key qualification for all those who have a direct relationship with people belonging to other cultures (Nardon-Schimd 2000, 31). Professional development of teachers for intercultural education should include two important dimensions: the dimension of awareness and the dimension of relations (Perotti 1994, 102). According to Carla Roverselli, the acquisition of intercultural competencies in itself is rather dynamic – it includes the maturity of the subjects – which ranges from a predominantly ethnocentric phase to a phase with ethnorelative characteristics (2016, 209). Milton Benett proposes a definition of intercultural competence that goes along these lines, referred to by Roverselli, which focuses on the development of intercultural sensitivity, while Dearle Deardoff also includes the ability to openness, respect, curiosity, and tolerance in the model of intercultural competence (210).

2.4   Teachers in Service of Education for European Citizenship

Documents issued by the Council of Europe and other European bodies correlate intercultural competence, intercultural education, and education for European citizenship. In this sense, cultural diversity in Europe is seen not only as an imperative of mutual understanding and coexistence but as a resource of mutual enrichment among different nations. Cultural diversity in all its splendour is lived every day in European kindergartens, schools, and colleges. These are privileged places of education for European citizenship. Every type of education, including intercultural education, is based on two levers: values-needs and rights-duties of those involved in the educational process. "Education for European and democratic citizenship attaches great importance to the value dimension of education and the interrelationships lived in schools and universities: mutual respect, participation, cooperation, responsible and competent commitment, cooperation and solidarity." (Piršl and Diković 2012, 113)

Schools are places of relationships in which students discover similarities and differences. That is why the focus of intercultural education is not on content and knowledge but on people, relationships, and interactions (Perotti 1994, 75–76). Intercultural education implies teaching – teacher service – as a call for ethical commitment. And that is not contrary to the notion of teaching as a purely professional engagement. It is necessary to promote the formation of teachers (fundamental and permanent) who will be sensitive to cultures as well as open to the diversity and interpretation of cultural baggage that students bring with them to school (Roverselli 2016, 202). In the formation of teachers, it should therefore be emphasized that interculturality presupposes the recognition of different cultures' values, their promotion of human dignity, development of a personal identity that integrates the relationship between interculturality and morality, and recognition and respect of different identities. In this sense, José Luis Moral holds that authentic cultural differences are primarily differences in the way we perceive life, death, and vision of the world or different cosmovisions that integrate different moral norms and values (2012, 99).

3.   Lifelong Learning

3.1   Lifelong Learning – Conceptual Meaning

Lifelong learning is defined as "all the lifelong learning activities undertaken by a person that result in the improvement of knowledge, skills, competences and/or qualifications, for personal, social and/or professional reasons" (European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network 2021, 25). It refers to

> "all activities aimed at the development of knowledge, skills, attitudes and values during one's lifetime (either through their acquisition or improvement), in the context of personal, social or professional development. Such a comprehensive concept covers learning at all stages of life and in all forms.

It includes programmes of formal education (early childhood and pre-school education; primary education; secondary education; higher education; and adult education and training), non-formal education, as well as incidental and spontaneous acquisition of knowledge, skills, attitudes and values through non-formal and informal learning. Lifelong learning represents the basis for personal development and for developing the capability of individuals to continuously adapt to changing circumstances in their personal lives, in the workplace and in the community." (Hrvatski sabor 2014)

Lifelong learning must include learning from the pre-school to the post-retirement age, including the full range of formal, non-formal and informal learning. Furthermore, lifelong learning must be understood as all learning activities undertaken throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills, and competences within a personal, civic, social and/or employment-related perspective (European Union 2002).

Council Resolution of 27 June 2002 on lifelong learning emphasizes the importance of providing access to lifelong learning opportunities to all, regardless of age, including specific actions aimed at disadvantaged people, those not participating in education and training, and migrants, as a means for facilitating their social integration. In order to raise awareness of how important it is to include inclusion in lifelong learning, European institutions have published several recommendations and resolutions mentioned in the first chapter.

3.2 Framework of the National Qualification Standard for Teachers in Primary and Secondary Schools in the Republic of Croatia

The umbrella document for the development of the teaching profession in the Republic of Croatia is the National Qualification Framework for Teachers in Primary and Secondary Schools, which was adopted in 2016 by the National Education Council in the form of a Recommendation. The framework provides descriptions of eight sets of learning outcomes (academic discipline, subject/ educational areas; learning and teaching; evaluation; learning environment; school-family collaboration; educational system and school organization; professional communication and interaction; professionalism and professional development) and their corresponding learning outcomes.

In the following section, we will try to answer the question of how we are developing the awareness and relations dimensions that Perotti mentions in Croatia, in the context of three of the eight sets of learning outcomes. Are teachers enabled to acquire new knowledge, skills, and competencies when it comes to certain sets of learning outcomes? Does the professional development in Croatia fulfil the need for internationalization of education and teacher mobility?

### 3.3	An Academic Discipline, Subject/ Educational Areas

The first set of learning outcomes refers to the academic discipline, i.e. educational subject or area. One of the listed outcomes is: "A teacher can connect other curriculum contents and cross-curricular topics with the subject he/she teaches." (Nacionalno vijeće za odgoj i obrazovanje 2016, 5) Educational expectations for students related to multiculturalism or interculturality in the Republic of Croatia are found within the curricula of interdisciplinary topics of Civic Education, Use of Information and Communication Technology, Entrepreneurship, Learning to Learn and Personal and Social Development (Ministarstvo znanosti i obrazovanja 2019a). Outcomes related to interculturality, or multiculturalism are listed in the curricula of several subjects: Islamic Religious Education, Catholic Religious Education, Orthodox Religious Education, Ethics, Sociology, Geography, Nature and Society, Music Culture and Music Art, Art Culture and Fine Arts. It is particularly interesting to see how the curricula of linguistic subjects taught in the Republic of Croatia approach the issue of interculturality and/or multiculturalism. In the curricula of Croatian, English, and French, the term intercultural competence is used, and one of the domains is intercultural communication competence, which indicates the great importance attached to learning about multiculturalism. There is no explicit mention of interculturality or multiculturalism in the subjects Greek and Latin. Some of these terms are referred to in the curricula of Italian, German, Serbian, Serbian language and culture, Czech language, Czech language and culture, Spanish language, Slovak language and culture and Hungarian language and literature (2019b). We can conclude that given the presence of interculturality in the curricula of subjects and interdisciplinary topics, teachers in Croatia intertwine the content of interculturality with a specific academic discipline.

### 3.4	Learning and Teaching

The second set of outcomes from the National Qualification Framework for Teachers in Primary and Secondary Schools relates to learning and teaching, with one of the outcomes being: "Teachers can introduce contemporary and socially relevant topics into their teaching, such as sustainable development, lifelong learning, social responsibility and respect for diversity." (Nacionalno vijeće za odgoj i obrazovanje 2016, 7) Diversity in the context of interculturality refers to cultural, ethnic, linguistic and religious diversity (Bedeković and Zrilić 2014, 113). In general, it can be said that one possesses intercultural competences if one demonstrates the following skills and attitudes: respect, self-awareness/identity, ability to take the perspective of another, ability to listen, ability to adapt and build relationships, and cultural humility (UNESCO 2013, 24).

According to some Croatian authors, teachers are interculturally competent when they are aware of the culture of others and when they do not passively accept social reality as it is, but actively participate in it with new proposals and ideas (Hercigonja 2017, 110). Respect for diversity, which is expressed through the intercultural competence of teachers, needs to be developed and that is di-

rectly related to lifelong learning of teachers. UNESCO states that the learning and application of intercultural competences is a lifelong endeavour that develops over time (2013, 26).

In the Republic of Croatia, the Education and Teacher Training Agency organizes and conducts professional development of teachers. Among the training programmes, there are those aimed at developing intercultural competencies.

The development of intercultural competencies of teachers working in schools in the Republic of Croatia is defined by the objectives of education, and includes teachers of various subjects, principals, educators in preschool institutions and professional associates in schools. In 2010, a training programme was organized for all teachers working in bilingual schools that offer integrated language and content learning (CLIL), which means that students have lessons of curricular subjects in a foreign or other language. The description of the programme stated that one of the advantages of such learning is that this way intercultural knowledge and understanding are built, and intercultural communication skills are developed (Agencija za odgoj i obrazovanje 2010). The training programme for German language teachers in the Republic of Croatia, organized in 2016, was intended to help teachers answer questions regarding the optimal choice of cultural and other elements that can mediate intercultural competencies in German language teaching in Croatia, and regarding the way the processing of cultural elements contributes to students' competence development (2016).

The goals of the training programme intended for teachers are defined in a way that describes what the participants of the training will be able to do after completing the training. In that sense, it is emphasized that participants will be able to: "apply approaches that create a classroom atmosphere in which students develop their intercultural competence and transversal attitudes, skills and knowledge" (2015), then

> "acquire basic intercultural competences, be able to establish satisfactory interactions and communications with people of other cultures, adopt intercultural attitudes, knowledge and skills – better understand and respect different cultures, adopt effective behaviour in other cultures – intercultural sensitivity, develop and expand personal knowledge and communication competence through collaborations with culturally different students." (2014a)

The competencies of teachers who conduct civic education in schools include, among other things, intercultural competencies that are strengthened during development programmes and defined in such a way that teachers will be able to "help students develop human values (solidarity, compassion), fundamental social and identity values (what is personal, native, homeland, European and global identity), as well as what are the identity differences and how to treat them, what are interculturality and intercultural dialogue and how they are applied" (2014b).

3.5 Collaboration with Family and Community in the School

The last place in the National Qualification Framework for Teachers in Primary and Secondary Schools in which learning outcomes can be linked to the field of interculturality is the fifth set of outcomes related to the collaboration with family and community in the school. We single out two of the mentioned outcomes: "Teachers can apply a variety of procedures to encourage family members or caregivers to get involved in the school life" [and] "teachers can show awareness of opportunities for participation in domestic and international projects and mobility programmes" (Nacionalno vijeće za odgoj i obrazovanje 2016, 10–11). When it comes to the first outcome, the intercultural dimension is present, while the need for intercultural competencies of teachers is noticeable precisely due to the involvement of the family and caregivers of students in school life.

The extended family, neighbours from the same housing estate, work colleagues, members of a particular religious group or people whose parents came from the same geographical location, all have their own ways of living in the world, their own expectations, traditions, and ambitions. In order to include them in the life of the school as a specific community that has its own rules and way of functioning, participants need to have highly developed intercultural competencies (UNESCO 2013, 12). In the Republic of Croatia, this dimension is clearly expressed in the inclusion of Roma and migrant students in the educational system (Hrvatić 2014). The Education and Teacher Training Agency, in cooperation with the "Korak po korak" Association, organized a development programme for educators, teachers and professional associates of the Kuršanec Elementary School, which is attended by Roma students. The objectives of the programme were as follows: to understand how stereotypes and prejudices are created and how to deconstruct them, to understand what oppression is and how to recognize it (with emphasis on the educational system), to find out what intercultural sensitivity is and to raise awareness of their own intercultural sensitivity, to get to the risk factors associated with intercultural learning, to find out what starting points are and how they are passed from generation to generation, to learn about the theories of group identity creation, to build a plan for creating an alliance for social justice. Several training programmes were organized at the Petrijanec Elementary School for all religious education teachers who work with Roma students in order to help them recognize the importance of special care for children of the Roma population in the school system of the Republic of Croatia (Agencija za odgoj i obrazovanje 2014c). Such training programmes for religious teachers aim to acquaint them with scientific and professional elements of intercultural education that contribute to a better understanding and acceptance of the Roma national minority from the perspective of religious education.

It should be noted that thanks to the Constitution of the Republic of Croatia, which defines national minorities and their rights, the situation in Croatia differs from those in other European countries. The official status of national minorities provides certain rights, including the right to education in one's own language and

script. That is why in Croatian schools, classes are held in the official Croatian language, but also in Czech, Serbian and Italian. Three models have been developed. In Model A, all classes are conducted in the language and script of the national minority, while the number of compulsory weekly Croatian language lessons is equal to the number of weekly lessons of the minority's language. In Model B, classes are conducted bilingually, and in Model C, classes are conducted in Croatian with an additional two to five weekly classes dedicated to learning (nurturing) the language and culture of the national minority (Vlada Republike Hrvatske 2022). Given this legislative framework, it can be concluded that intercultural competencies are rather necessary, and given the practice, they need to be present in the work of teachers, especially those who work within the previously described school models.

The second outcome listed in the Framework "Teachers can apply a variety of procedures to encourage family members or caregivers to get involved in the school life" is crucial in the context of our topic, because it relates to the lifelong learning of teachers in a specific way, through inclusion in one of the mobility programmes. In addition to their individual involvement in mobility programmes, teachers can encourage and guide students in projects where they meet people from different countries and learn together with them as part of the ERASMUS+ programmes, through eTwinning, School Education Gateway and Euroguidance. Learning by doing is achieved this way: it places students in an environment in which they practice their intercultural competence independently, from the content itself.

Some authors note that exposure and interaction with people of different cultures does not imply that they automatically acquire intercultural competencies and does not guarantee their acquisition (Amir 1969, 319–342) but working together on a project is certainly more than just exposure. The very fact that participants learn together with their peers from different countries proves that mobility programmes strengthen some of the elements listed on the Intercultural Competences Tree, such as multilingualism, knowledge, translation, or intercultural communicative competence (UNESCO 2013, 23).

Opportunities for lifelong learning of teachers in the Republic of Croatia, in the context of intercultural competencies, are based on the European strategic documents and the National Qualification Framework for Teachers in Primary and Secondary Schools. In addition to the formal training programmes organized by the competent agencies and the Ministry of Science and Education, it is possible to participate in the informal ones organized by various associations in the Republic of Croatia or those at the European level. It is necessary to develop intercultural competencies of teachers because the official state school curricula in the Republic of Croatia require the development of students' intercultural competencies, but also due to many other influences.

One of the challenges is certainly represented by the large number of refugees who have arrived in Europe since 2015, whereby the integration of refugees into the new social context is emerging as a key issue in all European countries. In ad-

dition to the importance of integration in terms of employment and social inclusion, the importance of the integration of refugee children into the educational system should also be emphasized, whereby education is seen as a basis for further learning, social inclusion, mutual understanding between refugees and the societies that accept them, the way according to employment, social inclusion and active participation in social, political and cultural life (Europska komisija 2016, 13). As much as the above represents a challenge for refugee children, one should ask how well the teachers in the educational system in Croatia are trained to teach refugee children, having in front of them certain difficulties that they may encounter, for example: working with vulnerable and traumatized children due to fleeing from the home country, having sufficient information about children's previous education, their specificities, possible special needs, the sufficiency of professional training for teachers in terms of adapting the teaching process to refugee students.

The most recent example is the inclusion of refugee students in the educational system due to the war in Ukraine. According to the official notice from the Ministry of Science and Education, migrant children from Ukraine should be provided with an opportunity to participate in preparatory classes of the Croatian language without prior testing, included in educational work in all school subjects according to their abilities, as well as evaluated and issued a diploma at the end of the school year (Ministarstvo znanosti i obrazovanja, 2022). In order for teachers to respond to this challenge as soon as possible, Guidelines, instructions, recommendations and proposals for activities designed to integrate vulnerable groups of refugee students have been prepared for teachers, educators and professional associates in primary and secondary schools (Ministarstvo znanosti i obrazovanja and Agencija za odgoj i obrazovanje, 2022). The guidelines aim to raise teachers' awareness regarding the acceptance of vulnerable groups, children and young people, refugees from war-torn areas, as well as to build socio-emotional skills in classrooms to enable the creation of a peaceful classroom environment where children and young people learn to respect diversity.

4. Intercultural Competencies of Religious Education Teachers

The encounter of different cultures in today's modern world has become an everyday reality. Intercultural interaction is an inevitable *modus vivendi* for contemporary people, and the success of this interaction requires not only information, but also awareness, respect for the other and the different, and a willingness to coexist. Therefore, there are great expectations from educational institutions, which are increasingly becoming a meeting place of different cultures and languages, that contemporary-structured school curricula articulate the contents, programmes, methods and procedures of teachers that will not only relate to the acquisition of knowledge but, looking at the world from a different perspective,

break down different social stereotypes, prejudices and stigmatization among people (Bedeković 2011, 140).

Since when it comes to schools, the religious education teachers are equal to other teachers and contribute to the educational goals of the school, they are required to, in addition to theological-religious, didactic-methodological, pedagogical and communication competencies, possess intercultural competencies that will help them promote necessary confrontation of Christianity, other religions and cultures, respecting consciences and differences, to encourage free answers and pluralism of opinion (Razum 2008, 96–97). In this regard, the new curriculum of Catholic religious education for primary schools and gymnasiums emphasizes that religious education, among other things, allows students to:

> "to get to know, acquire, preserve and develop one's own religious, cultural and national identity, as well as to know and respect the identities of other individuals and groups, while promoting dialogue and cooperation in a modern pluralistic society and a globalized world. It [religious education] also promotes other knowledge and competencies of students across various fields that contribute to the realization of the core values of the school curriculum, especially personal, social and civic responsibility and competencies." (Ministarstvo znanosti i obrazovanja 2019a)

Given the core outcomes, certain authors see precisely Catholic religious education as the subject that has the potential to be a "workshop on interculturality" (Fioroni 2006, 12), seeking to achieve this as a true place of dialogue that helps build a more tolerant, peaceful, and just life.

One of the central issues is certainly the following: To what extent are religious education teachers trained to mediate the intercultural dimension of religious education in the Republic of Croatia? To what extent do initial and vocational education programmes take into account the intercultural dimension of religious education teachers?

4.1 Initial Education Programmes for Religious Education Teachers

When discussing the subject Catholic Religious Education in the schools of the Republic of Croatia, it should be noted that the focus of teaching this subject is not only the transfer of Catholic content but also the achievement of certain goals/outcomes related to students and their knowledge/skills/values. In this sense, today religious education teachers are expected to possess a whole range of competencies, such as: the competence to achieve correlation - to be a bridge; critical interpretation: encouraging the development of students' critical judgment; interdisciplinary dialogue and religious competence (Barić and Razum 2019, 114–119).

Based on the insight into the initial formation programme for religious education teachers at the Catholic Faculty of Theology of the University of Zagreb, we can state that there are several courses that contribute to the development of these competencies, i.e. comprehension of contemporary issues, understanding the

other and the different, which is, in turn, reflected on religious education (Katolič-ki bogoslovni fakultet Sveučilišta u Zagrebu 2021). In this sense, it is necessary to point out certain courses that enable future religious education teachers to acqui-re the necessary competencies: Empirical Research in Religious Pedagogy, Profes-sional Identity of Religious Education Teachers, Pedagogy of Recognizing and Re-specting Diversity in Religious Education, Challenges of Secularity and Secularism, Interreligious dialogue, etc. These courses, as well as student engagement in cer-tain forms of student activities, help students develop knowledge, skills and atti-tudes that should help them develop empathy, solidarity, and cultural sensitivity. They also strive to achieve the conditions in which the basic principles of intercul-turalism are not only declarative, but integrated into all areas of schoolwork, in-cluding the relationship between students and teachers (Polić 2015, 449).

4.2 Professional Development Programmes for Religious Education Teachers

In addition to the initial formation, professional development is also extremely important for religious education teachers. Namely, as social, and educational changes are more and more pronounced, the demand for quality teacher training is increasing, and professional development programmes represent "a permanent professional support so that all teachers would be more successful in adapting to new educational requirements" (Mandarić and Barudžija 2019, 148). Also, profes-sional development conducted through various institutions provides appropriate support to religious education teachers and seeks to help them accept the value of lifelong learning and the obligation to contribute to the development of the school as a learning community as part of their professional identity (148).

Professional development programmes for the teachers of Catholic religious education in Croatia, in the form of Catechetical Schools and other forms of Pro-fessional Meetings, are organized at the national level by the National Catecheti-cal Office of the Croatian Bishops' Conference in cooperation with the Education and Teacher Training Agency. The aim of these programmes, in addition to moni-toring the new challenges that the school subject Catholic Religious Education, and consequently the religious education teacher face, is to intensify the dialogue with representatives of different denominations who are occasionally active par-ticipants in catechetical schools and other forms of professional meetings. Pro-fessional development for religious education teachers of other Christian Churches is organized by the competent body of each Church in cooperation with the Edu-cation and Teacher Training Agency. When on the topic of professional deve-lopment of religious education teachers at the national level, it is worth mentio-ning the thematic titles of Catechetical Schools and Professional Meetings that were organized in the last ten years, so that we could see how much professional education of religious education teachers takes into account the correlation of religious education and modern changes in society as well as the needed influen-ce of mentioned changes on the formation of religious education teachers (Arhi-va stručnih skupova 2021).

Year	Name of the Catechetical School and/or Religious Teachers' Conference
2012	The Topicality of Dialogue among Christian Churches
2012	Dialogue – the Path Leading to the Other
2012	The Mystery of Jesus Christ and the Diversity of the Christian Churches – Religious Education and Ecumenical Dialogue
2012	Religion and the Contemporary World
2013	Intercultural Education through the Prism of Religious Education – Problem and Perspective
2014	Community pedagogy and education for peace
2014	Intercultural Education through the Prism of Religious Education – Religious Education Student and Teacher
2015	Religious Education Classes within the Guidelines of the New Curricular Reform
2016	Religious Education Today
2016	Competences of Religious Education Teachers
2017	Challenges of Education in Faith in Modern Society
2018	Our Everyday Education – Family and Society Facing Challenges
2019	Catholic Religious Education in the Curricular Reform Process
2019	Learning Faith within Encounters with Reality
2019	Being for the Other
2019	Communication Skills of Educators in Conflict Situations
2020	Contact with Vulnerability in Religious Vocation
2020	Noticing Individuals – Vulnerable Groups of Students
2021	Brotherhood and Social Friendship in the Teaching of Religious Education in the Light of the Encyclical „Fratelli tutti"
2021	Dimensions of Christian Anthropology in Dialogue with the Present and through the Perspective of Education
2021	Religious Education Teacher as a Motivator, Moderator and Animator – Quality Communication to Achieve Learning Outcomes in the Teaching Process
2021	Religious Education Teacher Faced with the Challenges of the Modern World – „Are you close to the Kingdom of God?"

Table 1: *The thematic titles of Catechetical Schools and Professional Meetings from 2012 to 2021.*

By pointing out and analysing what has been done so far at the level of adaptation of Catholic religious education to the educational requirements of contemporary schools, we could point out that much has been done in Croatia recently in regard to developing the intercultural and interreligious consciousness of religious teachers. However, there is still a number of opportunities for involving many in intercultural work at different levels. Due to the growing changes and challenges we face every day, in the future, all forms of professional development for religious education teachers will need to be based not only on the openness to diversity, but also on its' recognition and acceptance. Subject, pedagogical, psychological, and didactic-methodological competences will, therefore, no longer be sufficient to obtain a teacher's diploma and to work in a modern cultural plural society – the development of intercultural competence will be one of the fundamental tasks of professional development and lifelong education of teachers (Bedeković 2011, 143–145).

5.   Conclusion

The cultural differences that characterize European societies represent a source of European wealth and beauty, but also a possible generator of tension and conflict. Conflict resolution skills are developed throughout life and practised in a variety of life situations. It is therefore not unusual that in the context of recognizing the richness and beauties of the other and the different, as well as in the context of conflict resolution abilities, significant attention is paid to interculturality, which encompasses the development of intercultural competencies. Communication involving knowledge, respect and understanding is a prerequisite for their development. Every culture builds human civilization with its values and contributions, as Pope Francis stated in his encyclical "Fratteli tutti", expressing the desire to recognize the dignity of every human being and to revive our aspiration to achieve universal fraternity throughout the challenges of the time that has been given to us (2021, no. 9).

Past practice has shown that teachers in the Republic of Croatia strengthen their intercultural competencies through various professional development programmes. The development of intercultural competencies of teachers is possible within the academic discipline of individual subjects or subject areas, through learning and teaching of students, and through cooperation with different teachers in the school, students' families, and the community in which the school is located. The curricula of many subjects and interdisciplinary topics, on the basis of which they are taught, list intercultural competence, among other things. Institutions that conduct professional development programmes for teachers have organized workshops on interculturalism for teachers of various subjects on several occasions.

When it comes to rights and obligations, religious education teachers in the Republic of Croatia are equal to all other teachers and they contribute to the educational goals of the school, while the curriculum states that religious education promotes students' knowledge and competencies in various fields that contribute to the core values of the school curriculum and personal, social and civic responsibility and competencies. Due to all the above, religious education has the opportunity to be a kind of a workshop on interculturality. Religious education teachers are trained for this throughout the existing initial education programmes, as well as the professional development programmes. From the above data on development programmes for religious education teachers that strengthen their intercultural competencies, it can be concluded that in the Republic of Croatia, there is a level of awareness of the importance of this topic, as well as that certain steps are being taken so that religious education teachers could respond to the demands of their time and the changes occurring in society and the educational system. In regard to interculturality, contemporary plural society, as well as the modern Church, will not be able to dismiss the need for even more intense lifelong learning in general, especially when it comes to teachers of religious education and their need for an even greater range of topics that should strengthen

their intercultural competencies.

Based on the analysis of teachers' development programmes that are part of their lifelong learning, we can conclude that intercultural competencies of teachers in Croatia are developed through various lifelong learning programmes but given the global changes and war-induced crisis situations, lifelong learning programmes will need to include the development of intercultural competencies of teachers even more.

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