# **Foreign Language Competences and the Transformation of the Czech Armed Forces**

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# Introduction

There are 7,151 recognized languages spoken by mankind around the world. Some of them are used more frequently than others. The top ten languages spoken by the highest number of L1 speakers (Σ 3.1 bil.) include Mandarin Chinese, Spanish, English, Hindi, Bengali, Portuguese, Russian, Japanese, Yue Chinese and Vietnamese. English then represents the language with the absolute highest number of L1 and L2 speakers (1.5 bil.), followed with mandarin Chinese (1.1 bil.), Hindi, Spanish, French, Arabic, Bengali, Portuguese, Russian and Urdu. In total, more than 5.4 bil. L1 and L2 speakers speak at least one of these top ten languages.

From the perspective of the Czech language, we get rather limited numbers of app. 10.7 mil. L1 speakers and 3 mil. L2 speakers. In addition, we can perceive that Slovak language (5 mil. L1 and 2 mil. L2) speakers can understand Czech language as well.

Ability to communicate foreign languages represents an important component of the competences representing a necessary prerequisite for success in today's globalized and interconnected world. It is a critical instrument of shaping one´s views of world (Carfagna, 2006), connected with cultural awareness knowledge. It can be also viewed as a power of another/different point of view on the reality of globalized world. Today, English is the global lingua franca. However, English is spoken just by 25% of the global population. Shall English remain the global lingua franca also in 2100?

Foreign language competences are crucial for militaries in many aspects. Let’s mention the necessity of interoperability among allies, incl. host national support, the need to communicate during deployments abroad and international exercises. Internationalization of higher education, incl. professional military education and lessons learnt sharing can be further aspects. Recently, growing relevance of cyber domain and InfOps brings another perspective of the importance of foreign language competences.

# Czechs and their foreign language competences

Foreign language competences of the Czech population has been substantially influenced by the Communist history of the then Czechoslovakia. Before 1989, Russian language was prioritized as the L2 at all types of schools. English and German was also taught as L3. However, there was limited access to resources and authentic language. During the Cold War era, language education in the Czechoslovakia focused primarily on grammar and vocabulary acquisition. After 1989, English emerged as dominant L2 with other languages also taught (mainly German and Russian), but to a lesser extent. Language education was influenced by society-wide processes like the country´s accession to NATO, EU integration but also by emerging business links to western countries, booming tourism etc.

Today, 34% of the Czech population are active English speakers but just 11% of them are fairly good in this language (13 % are active Russian, 20% German speakers). On the other hand 1/3 of the Czech population speaks just their mother tongue. When compared to western European countries, Czechs are characterized by relatively low level of multilingualism. Czech society is nearly not at all exposed to authentic language (connected with society diversity, mass media almost only in Czech etc.). According to some comparisons Czechs belong among the 3 EU members with the lowest level of foreign language competences

# Czech Armed Forces and foreign language competences

Czech Ministry of Defense has rather robust English language teaching and testing capacity (yearly, app. 4,000 candidates, 1,300 different language courses participants). Its language education system is based on stabilized and competent faculty (both evaluators and instructors). The focus of attention, however, has been on English, while there has been rather limited teaching and testing capacity for other languages. As the language education system focused on development of general language competences of both military and civilian personnel, there have been rather limited capacities allocated to the area of specific military terminology. Relatively high number of candidates tested with NATO STANAG 6001 exams include all newly recruited soldiers and cadets/students of all military schools. Effectiveness of the language education system in the Czech Armed Forces is limited by the relatively high average age of language courses participants (47 years) and very low use of English language in the context of current duties of the personnel (93% of English language courses participants declare they do not need/use English in their work/service). This is probably the main reason why personnel of the Czech Armed Forces and MoD failed to significantly exceed the 50% threshold for meeting the set language requirements.

Lack of long-term strategic approach to language education can be – besides the level of meeting set language requirements – illustrated by several examples:

2013 –Deployment of Czech soldiers in Mali (Czech military lacked senior officers advanced in French language as well as lower ranks with at least basic (survival) level of French.).

2019 –Assisting German civil defense (Providing temporary bridging construction and related training to German civil defense personnel with no English language competences resulted in the need to interpret related training and translate manuals.).

2022 – Training Ukrainian troops (In 2018 – General Staff decided to cancel Russian language classes for cadets, fortunately reconsidered in 2019. In 2022, Russian identified as the only common language to use when training Ukrainian troops. Due to very limited Russian language competences in the Czech military, Russian language teacher has to train futures interpreters, incl. military and technical terminology.).

2023 – German Leopards in the Czech military (Receiving German tanks required technical training in German. For only 1 member of the tank battalion was capable to communicate adequately in German, German language teachers had to learn terminology and assist during the technical training and translate related documents.).

2023 – Further military assistance to Ukraine (After more than 18 months after the beginning of the Russian invasion, the Czech MoD without prior measures to develop necessary capacities started to require Ukrainian language courses.).

# Implications

Based on the three decades of development of Czech Armed Forces language education system, we can several lessons learnt:

* Effective language education and training system needs not only effective teaching and testing capacities, first, it needs the right concept linked to the Armed Forces HR strategy:
  + Language requirements should be set carefully, reflecting the reality, avoiding any future unsystematic changes.
  + Language training concept represents assignment and anchor for language training providers therefore, they should be also stable and set with a long-term perspective.
* Armed Forces language policy must reflect reality in the society:
  + For miracles don´t happen, especially not in the military, achieving higher level of foreign language competences cannot be expected automatically. It is feasible but needs long time and means high costs.
* When investing in language training, priorities should be set based on:
  + Needs of the military (who really needs and uses the language now or will do so soon).
  + Expected “payback period“.
* English is a priority but other languages should not be neglected:
  + All potential regions of defense/security interests should be considered and languages spoken in these regions should be included in the “portfolio”.
* Language education needs a lot of time:
  + It´s impossible to respond effectively e.g. after a political decision to deploy forces to certain country/regions. Troops to be deployed have many things to do and usually not much time in such situations. Therefore, it is possible to include just some kind of refresher language training, training enabling to increase language skills by one level is not feasible.
* Language competences need to be maintained:
  + Besides SLP achievement education a “maintenance“system should be in place (optimum would be forcing personnel to use English in their work/service - natural exposure).
* Military speaks/needs military language:
  + Military terminology/special purpose language is as important as general language competences, therefore these specific teaching capacities should be developed in balance with general language teaching capacities.