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**The European Union and the Promise of Democracy:
What can Citizenship Education and Civil Society contribute?**

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Input

**Workshop 4
The EU as a topic of citizenship education: The democratic deficit and
the loss of trust in the European project as new challenges**

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How do young people today experience the European integration – or are we meanwhile in a process of European and social disintegration and of decaying democracy? (1) Firstly, I am arguing that we are not only facing democratic *deficits*, but also a substantial *crisis* of democracy. How are the current multiple crises being addressed in citizenship education? Classroom research show that democracy deficits are seldom considered as a starting point for an open learning process. Instead, in their classroom, teachers tend to offer a highly optimistic European conception despite their own skepticism. (2) Secondly, I would like to point out, that there is not only *one* common European project, but also several strongly controversial models of the European project. Which one should be the leading model for citizenship education: a European Free Trade Area, a "Europe of nation states", a "kind of United States of Europe" or, "the sui generis multi-level governance system"? In the past, the European citizens themselves have rejected some of the steps towards a deepened European integration, as in the case of the treaty for a European Constitution in 2005. (3) Finally, I want to defend a critical and emancipatory approach. Citizenship Education should not only advertise the EU and promote the affirmation of a European identity. I argue that the European democracy can only be strengthened by *critical* citizens. Many young people want to actively get involved and long for *alternatives* to the neoliberal European project that dominated the last decades.

1. **Crisis? – What Crisis?**

For many, the enduring economic crisis means the decline of social welfare and leads to existential fears. Youth unemployment rates are as high as one-third in many countries of the Euro zone; even reaching 62% in Greece (second quarter 2013). This leads to new protests and to more skepticism towards political institutions. As we can see on the Eurobarometer data (EB79/2013), the level of trust in both the European and the national political institutions continue to decrease. Though there is still more trust in the European Union than in national institutions, the rates are falling to very low levels (31 and 25 %). The economic crises also bring along national isolation and support for new right-wing populism. At the same time, the EU external borders are being strictly closed off, leading to hundreds of dead bodies from refugees in the Mediterranean Sea. This, of course, is not only a financial crisis, a currency crisis or a sovereign debt crisis. While member states are facing bankruptcy, we are experiencing increasing wealth as well as growing poverty altogether: European societies show a prosperity gap, not known so far. Social scientists refer to a „re-financing crisis" (Bofinger/Habermas/Nida-Rümelin 2012) and to a crisis of democracy, described by Rancière (1995, 142f.) and Crouch (2004) as "post-democracy", not only in the case of the

EU but also of the Western nation states. Dependency on the financial markets comes to a new level, where financial actors publicly declare themselves to be "the fifth power" (Rolf Breuer, executive board Deutsche Bank, in: Die Zeit, 27-4-2000).

What kind of knowledge and which competences do young people need to understand European politics today? How do they train for their (future) role as sovereign citizens? The results of qualitative classroom research in Germany and the United Kingdom (open interviews and questionnaires of 65 teachers and 241 students) showed that students often tend to have a pragmatic and optimistic conception of being European citizens (Eis 2010). They expressed less objections and skepticism towards the EU and the performance of European politics compared to their teachers. The interviewed teachers expressed considerably far more concerns, fears and insecurities associated with the European integration. The list of expressed skepticisms covered a wide range of propositions like "dismantling of the social standards", "prosperity must be shared more now", "danger of relapsing into a free trading zone", "too much bureaucracy and too many particular interests". Teachers were concerned that majority decisions would turn into "cowardly compromises", that citizens' "frustration and dissatisfaction would increase". Some felt threatened by migration and by economic developments, the "power of the trusts, social dumping, oasis for Monsanto's genetically modified corn" as well as by ideas of losing sovereignty, identity, and traditional European values (Eis 2010, 42f.).

In the classroom however, teachers seldom reveal their own reservations and criticisms concerning the effects of the Europeanization processes. Instead, some teachers demonstrate a highly optimistic and euphoric European conception. Yet their repeated emphasis on peace and prosperity, the glorification of the "new opportunities" in a "unified Europe" do not strike as consistent and authentic. Teachers pay ambivalent lip services when describing themselves as "actually ardent followers" of a "first of all fantastic" Europe. They now and then imply "however ..." in the course of the interview but the following criticism hardly becomes a subject to be delt with in the course of social studies at school (I analyzed 64 lessons for the study, Eis 2010, 45ff.). Teachers' skepticism and criticism of the democratic deficit implicitly determine the underlying structures of classroom interaction, but – unfortunately – they are not used as a starting point for an open learning-process for *both* students *and* teachers. Both documented interviews and classroom research show that institutional reforms and democratization of the European Union are conceived so far almost exclusively in terms of either parliamentary democracy or a more direct democracy, that is, always under the state-oriented paradigm of citizenship. The appearance of non-governmental actors, of new methods of governance in civil society, of participatory consultations or protests and social movements are hardly expressed. Neither students nor teachers, at large, seem to have cognitive concepts for the EU as a "multi-level system". Students and teachers alike have internalized the "classical federal state concept", ultimately related to the centralized state.

2. European Project? – What Project?

What kind of „European Project" is at stake? What paradigm of European democracy should be taught in EU-Citizenship Education? The economic, political and social integration of Europe always has been an open and conflictual process. European integration is not merely a history of successes. The process of integration is also connected with mechanisms of exclusion, disintegration and democratic step-backs. "It will be tragic and literally fatal, if we would lose democracy on the way to stabilizing the Euro and further integration" (Voßkuhle 2012, 9). Also for the president of the German Federal Constitutional Court, the question has not yet been decided: Will there actually be a further development of democracy while deepening the integration of the Euro zone (e.g. with a Fiscal Compact) or instead will the principles of a parliamentarian democracy be betrayed in the context of the crisis policy? Nevertheless, the matter of a democratic deficit is not only questioned at the level of institutions and the decision-making process. Since the very beginning of the European

integration, political elites as well as citizens have united around diverse projects: a "Europe of nations" ("Europe des patries", Charles de Gaulle), a "kind of United States of Europe" (Winston Churchill), a Europe of free trade agreements, a "Europe of regions and citizens" or a Europe, socially and politically integrated.

A group of German researchers distinguished five different political projects, struggling for hegemony (Kannankulam/Georgi 2012, 41ff.). Today, the "neo-liberal project for hegemony" widely determines European politics. The researchers assume a development towards an "authoritarian etatism", perpetuating the interests of the financial markets. As a second project, trade Unions and many European intellectuals support a "pro-European social project". They claim more democratic control, revaluation of the European Parliament and common European social policies. Euro-skeptical positions arise in the conservative camp as well as on the left wing. According to the "national-conservative project" and the "national-social project"[1], democratic sovereignty and social welfare may only be maintained by separating the EU from national levels. We should, however, not simply refer to alleged pro-Europeans or anti-Europeans. Many NGOs and citizens support a "left-liberal alternative project", criticizing the EU's sealing off and isolationist practice. They claim a new immigration and human rights policy, taxation of financial transactions; and they ask for sustainable climate and development policies instead of agricultural subsidies. With the persisting crisis, more and more networks get organized with rising support from already established associations like the unions, environmental organizations, human rights groups, and also religious associations. Attac, Finance Watch, Friends of the Earth Europe or Corporate Europe and many other organizations act in concert in campaigns and critical lobbying. This central role of civil society actors leads us to my final part.

3. EU-Citizenship Education? – What kind of citizens, what approach to education?

Limited spaces of a transnational public sphere are emerging. Thousands of civil society associations, interest groups and lobbies act on the European level. Even if no Europe-wide party structure has been established yet (and perhaps is not desirable or possible), there are numerous ways open to citizens for participating in civil society organizations and campaigns. But the questions are: Does active citizenship has any effect on "learning democracies", and which interest groups are dominating the decision-making process? With the *Lisbon Treaty* and the new *European Citizen Initiative*, there had been high expectations in the enforcement of a more participatory democracy and in the revaluation of *civil society*, guaranteed in article 11, 2: "The institutions shall maintain an open, transparent and regular dialogue with representative associations and civil society."

The first European Initiative "Water is a Human Right" was an enormous success, with almost twice as many signatures than needed (www.right2water.eu). Parliaments are not the sole place where political alternatives flourish. For the last 40 years now, plans for a "Tobin-tax" have been elaborated. The network Attac was created in 1998 with the very aim of introducing a global tax on foreign exchange and financial transactions as a "solidarity tax". The Attac movement gained strong solidarity support of various associations and NGOs. The pressure on national governments was strong enough, after all, for introducing the Tax on Financial Transactions in at least 11 European member states on the basis of an *Enhanced Cooperation*. However, awareness of and support for civil society organizations by a wider public remain very limited. To take part in consultations launched by EU institutions (especially by the Commission) requires a high level of professionalism, reached only by financially strong lobbies and several established International NGOs. Still, the chances to

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[1] The provocative term of a „État national social" goes back to Étienne Balibar (2001, 240f.). It emphasizes the interdependency between the nation-state and the development of the European welfare state to integrate the working class since the end of 19th century. Today, several left-Keynesian, left-national as well as social-conservative actors consider the preservation of the social welfare state on the national level the only realistic strategy to protect social achievements (Kannankulam/Georgi 2012, 49f.).

get access and to actually *use* these participation opportunities are *unequal* and dominated by mechanisms of social exclusion and self-exclusion.

Young people are looking for effective ways to achieve political influence. Numerous protest activities like the occupy movement or protests against the ACTA-agreement create new forms of mobilization and solidarity. Many citizens doubt, however, that they can perform any active role apart from the one of an economical high performer or a solvent consumer. Responsible active citizenship cannot be reduced to affirmative participation in the actual institutional system. If we agree with the analysis of democratic deficits and structural crises, citizenship education will need to focus on alternative paradigms of European integration, and on the danger of decaying democracy. Not only the *existing* opportunities of participation and active citizenship programs should be encouraged, but also the mechanisms of exclusion and *possibilities withheld* of sharing power should be at the center of citizenship education practices. Political indifference or even apathy and euro-skepticism cannot be assigned solely to the consequences of insufficient civic literacy. A deficit-oriented approach would hardly meet the requirements of the structural shifts of power in European democracies. Even the CRELL study's *Active Citizenship Indicator* has included "Protest and Social Change" as one substantial part of citizenship education and the development of a living and learning democracy (Hoskins/Mascherini 2009, 469), although I am still skeptical, whether the *testing* of civic competences really helps to educate critical citizens. Democratic legitimacy and participation in the European context is not possible in a solely parliamentary way. Models of a participatory and deliberative democracy play an increasingly important role thanks to new forms of governance and social struggles. But these models should also be considered critically that is with regard to their limits and the economic and social conditions they imply.

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