



Citizenship Education Facing Nationalism and Populism in Europe

Strategies - Competencies – Practices

Conference Paper

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Synopsis of the results of the workshop V

Concepts and Practices in Southeastern Europe: How can Citizenship Education be Made More Popular?

Moderator: Rayna Gavrilova

The moderator opened the workshop by introducing the speakers Caroline Hornstein Tomic and Ivaylo Dichev and asking them to share their experience and observations on citizenship education in SEE. The two speakers were invited to comment on a few questions: What is specific about the experience of Southeastern Europe? What seem to be the main issues and topics for an adequate citizenship education (CE)? What seems to be working (in their own experience)?

The floor was then opened to the audience of approximately 30 persons who were invited to comment and ask questions. The presenters and the audience challenged the stereotype that there is some kind of uniqueness of the Balkans - a view, which tend to essentialize the idiosyncrasies. Most speakers agreed that the particularity of most Southeasteuropean countries is the unfortunate accumulation of challenges known in many other European countries: close coexistence and geographical mix of many different ethnic and religious communities; economic hardship and relatively low standards of living; painful transition from totalitarian regimes to democracy in a short period of time; weak or non-existent states with unstable law-enforcement systems; challenges of adaptation to the requirement of the EU membership; the war and armed-conflict traumas (for some).

Based on their diverse experiences the speakers from the panel and from the audience identified a number of topics and approaches that could promote a strong CE agenda.

Among the **deficits** in this sphere in the region they identified: the lack of commitment of the political establishment to introduce and support CE; the fact that CE is often not integrated in the official school curricula and practiced mostly by civic organizations;

From their experience the participants from Germany, Italy, Serbia, Bulgaria, Austria and others suggested **practical approaches** such as: training, reeducating and offering life-long learning to teachers; paying equal attention and lending support to both formal and informal education; encouraging the growth of new leadership; giving students a) voice, and b) choice; looking around and finding opportunities; focusing the efforts to change practices instead of changing structures; giving power to progressive teachers.

The **list of topics** that appeared to be somewhat neglected and in need to be highlighted in the curriculum of CE was not very long but there was a clear emphasis on: awareness and protection of human rights, living in diversity, ability to distinguish between populism and real concern, adaptation to an environment of growing mobility and migration; development of legal culture, legal literacy, understanding what means rule of law, and of course history.

The second part of the workshop was devoted specifically to the question “How to make Citizenship Education more popular?” It is worth noting that even after four hours of deliberations the exchange became even livelier as the audience was kindly pressed to propose appropriate solutions and approaches.

Some suggestions were more **general**: to place special emphasis on personal experience of otherness (contacts of all kind with the outside world); to support generation change; to use artistic inventiveness as vehicle, especially across borders (all kind of borders); to adopt an ‘anthropological’ approach - going to and among students and citizens and talking with them.

A second group formed the very **practical** suggestions: seriously involve popular culture, TV, new media; take pop culture very seriously, use serious marketing; provide protected places and space for frank dialogue; use not only pop-culture but sub-culture (hip-hop, etc.); offer free platforms - physical and virtual; keep in mind that short-term projects are rarely enough in CE.

The moderator asked the audience if there is a consensus what should be the **contents** of the CE. There was a consensus that there is a core curriculum; minimum standards that should be taught in every school; however there was no consensus about the contents of this minimum beyond adherence to democratic principles and in first place the right to vote. On the other hand all agreed that CE should be about teaching democratic skills such as: respect for the other; respect for difference; tolerance; ability to listen; ability to speak up for yourself; awareness of ones’ rights but also reintroduction of the concept of citizens duties

The discussion during the workshop was lively, intense and diverse. Nevertheless it is important to note that if the regional scope (Southeastern Europe) was a good starting point, which grounded the discussion and provided cases the reflection and the recommendations seem of a much broader range. At the end the speakers and audience seemed to be convinced and endorsed a few general and important recommendation for citizenship education as a whole:

- Adopt a pluralistic model of CE: develop, encourage and support both vertical (top-down, formal) and horizontal (networks, civil society organizations) CE; experts and volunteers; high brow and low brow;
- Read the context.
- there is an acute need of serious research what is really working;
- keep listening to the people (students, grown ups), take seriously those whom you aspire to educate;
- don’t always try to come up with a solution or a final truth but always keep the dialogue open.