



★ NETWORKING EUROPEAN CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION

European Conference

Closing the empowerment gap through citizenship education How to address educationally disadvantaged groups

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Background Information Learning Method – a playful Access to Citizenship Education (Outdoor Workshop)

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Opposition against communism in Poland 1976-89

Citizenship education is a conversation about values we consider important for the functioning of a democratic state and society. However, these democratic values are not a priori given to us; they emerged in certain historical context. The experience of democratic opposition against communism can be good departure point for educational projects in our region. We propose to discuss this experience with participants of the workshop in a formula of an “urban game”.

The participants play members of an opposition network and have to act together under clandestine conditions. They have to respond creatively to repression, organisational challenges of the underground, etc. The values emerge in the course of action. The story of Polish opposition was the process in which actors formed both themselves and the movement. This is the ideational background of our workshop.

Why? Emergence of organized opposition

In June 1976 increases in the price of meat caused industrial workers in Ursus and Radom to organize a protest strike. It turned out to be the key moment and political opportunity for Polish dissidents to build wider opposition movement.

By early 1976 communists were caught in Poland between country's growing economic problems, external debts, and the human rights discourse of the Helsinki Accords. Some circles of Polish intelligentsia harboured no illusions more about the possibility of building legal revisionist or Catholic opposition to the system and decided consciously to act illegally. Oppositionists ceased to be preoccupied with telling the party-state authorities how to act and concentrated their efforts on society as the basis for resistance. They argued that the programme of the opposition “should be addressed to independent public opinion and not just to the totalitarian authorities. Instead of acting as a prompter to the government, telling it how to improve itself, this programme should tell society how to act”. Social groups appeared which were able to invent and create institutions of its own, independent from the state.



The history of Polish opposition can be perceived as a story of inventing and shaping new possibilities for action. This process rapidly accelerated in Poland in the mid-1970s. Its most important point was invention by some milieus of Polish intelligentsia a new formula for the opposition against the communist system and its repressions. This formula was epitomized by the Workers' Defence Committee (Komitet Obrony Robotników KOR) founded in summer 1976. The main objective of the Committee was to help workers – victims of communist repressions in industrial centers of Ursus and Radom. But equally important as legal and financial support was information about the reprisals of communist authorities. In order to inform about repressions and the activities of the Committee the KOR members launched in fall 1976 the short samizdat periodical "KOR Communiqué". It was typewritten and copied. Every involved person produced at once about 5-7 carbon copies on average. It was a typical „samizdat” where the process of making copies was also the process of creating networks of opposition. The oppositionists met in private apartments and there was difficult to separate this social life from their oppositional activities.

All these networks of contention were very important when four years later, on July 1, 1980, the communist government introduced changes in prices and in the system of meat sales that doubled the cost of some types of meat. Strikes began immediately and continued spontaneously across Poland. The strikers demanded not only economic benefits but also fundamental political freedoms. The collaborators of underground publishing houses published the Strike Information Bulletin "Solidarność" at the shipyard. The Communist Party was forced to sign a formal agreement concerning the 21 demands put forward by the strikers.

With circa 10 million members Solidarność trade union became the first significant mass organization in Eastern Europe outside the Communist party structures. While in other communist countries the scope of contention was limited to relatively small circle of dissidents, Poland became as soon as in 1980 the only communist country with broad opposition movement instead of isolated islands of dissent.

How? Repertoires of action

The founders of KOR and most other oppositional networks adopted a strategy of selective openness. Their addresses and telephones were distributed with every document they issued.

At the same time certain parts of organization, such as its publishing outlets and printing facilities, remained underground.

Already in fall 1976 the first division of labour within opposition started to develop. Some people travelled to Ursus and Radom to the workers, some people were responsible for collecting money, other for collecting and checking information about repressions, other for editing the "Communique" and the second samizdat publication "Biuletyn Informacyjny". Other activists started to publish periodical "Robotnik" addressed to workers, which translated KOR general strategy into specific tactics, e.g. how to organize an occupation-strike, what to demand. Some of them were responsible for coordination of printing activities and use of first available duplicating machines. At the beginning they attempted to print using a wringer machine until the first small duplicating machine was smuggled from the West.

Production and distribution of periodicals, brochures and books was key repertoire of Polish opposition. The underground publishing in Poland between 1976 and 1989 was a phenomenon on a scale unmatched in other communist countries: print runs of several thousand copies, wide circle of readers reaching far beyond dissidents, large number of publishing houses, distribution networks, printing facilities, as well as the dynamics of growth, organizational change and functional specialization. Already in the late 1970s it went beyond the scope and rules of typewritten classic *samizdat* limited to small circle of dissidents.

The community of people involved in the underground publishing formed a communication circuit linking authors, publishers, printers, distributors and readers. This network was widely called in Poland “drugi obieg” (“the second circulation”) – which was a circulation of books and periodicals illegally produced and disseminated without censorship’s approval. The clandestine publishing houses were called widely by their managers and rank-and-file collaborators “firms”. And in fact, they proved to be relatively effective “firms”. Till the end of the communism they managed to break the state monopoly of publishing production and publish over 6500 books in the underground circulation. Additionally over 3000 titles of periodicals on a regular or semi-regular basis were published.

Most organizations and networks active in the opposition movement (e.g. Student Solidarity Committees, cells of Solidarność trade union) tried to establish their own clandestine printing houses. They also started other independent activities as: educational seminars and lectures covering political and historical issues prohibited in official curricula. Various initiatives emerged which addressed their activities to particular social groups: farmers and other professional groups.

The Communists didn’t give up. On Sunday December 13, 1981, they declared martial law, outlawed Solidarity, arrested most of its leaders, and drove the rest underground. The martial law was imposed by the Military Council for National Salvation lead by, then, prime minister General Wojciech Jaruzelski and consisting of 20 other high ranking military officers. Thousands of Solidarność leaders and activists were arrested and imprisoned. Martial Law was suspended on December 31, 1982 and terminated on July 22, 1983. Some of the restrictive legislation introduced during the martial law remained in force through the end of the eighties.

Decentralized Solidarność network emerged at that time in the underground on the wave of mobilization against the imposition of martial law. It included several underground publishing houses, hundreds of periodicals, thousands of trade union organizations, and even underground theaters, galleries, and video rentals. Participants of the movement called it an “independent society” or “underground society”.

On 11 September 1986 the government decided to release political prisoners. Repression subsided, larger print runs were possible. In last years of communism the reactions of the authorities were more relaxed. However, the society became tired. Social research showed more apathy and anomy. There was more and more difficult to find people willing to cooperate with underground oppositional networks. There was no similar excitement as in the time of Solidarity and directly after the imposition of martial law. Authorities were increasingly busy with themselves, with protecting their own interests. There is increased conviction of the need to switch to market economy. New negotiations with Solidarity began. Clandestine publications began to be sold openly in street stalls.

Meaning of Solidarność

The election of June 4, 1989 (and the second round of June 18) brought a landslide victory to Solidarność: 99% of all the seats in the Senate and all of the possible seats in the Sejm.

“Solidarność” became in Poland the “origin myth” and the symbol of democratic transformation. It was a movement of “moral revival”, something very idealistic, but simultaneously something very practical, because this “moral revival” turned out to be an excellent weapon against the communist system.

Although the most popular “frame” of Polish opposition was >>“WE” against “THEM”>> we should not equate “opposition” with “society”. Mass participation of 10 million members in legal Solidarity trade union 1980-81 was exception. After the imposition of martial law only the most motivated minority was active. What was their fundamental motivation?



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One of Polish sociologists and simultaneously active underground publisher proposed following answer: their active participation in underground social movement was “the pursuit of normal life”. Their motivation should not be understood necessarily in political categories, they were looking for self-fulfillment, “normal”, active life.

“Solidarność” was one of these rare “initiator movements” that set in motion an identifiable protest cycle in the whole region. Movements in other communist countries drew their impetus and inspiration in varying degrees from Polish opposition.

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