



Citizenship Education Facing Nationalism and Populism in Europe

Strategies - Competencies – Practices

Report

Workshop 1: Media and Communication: New ways of responding to media populism

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The goal of this workshop, as stated in the conference program, was to reflect on the role of the media (including the Internet) in the propagation of populist slogans and proposals in a variety of national contexts. The three central questions of the workshop were:

- What competences, formats and models of citizenship education are necessary to address the phenomenon of 'media populism'?
- What shapes does media publicity assume in Western and in Eastern Europe? What are the similarities? What are the differences?
- How can we create a European platform that serves as a starting point for establishing a European public sphere? What should it look like?

Christian Mihr, senior editor of *eurotopics*, a daily translation service of leading European newspapers, (www.eurotopics.de) opened the workshop by giving a brief report on the media seminar (www.nece.eu) with European journalists held the day before in Sofia.

Yildiz Akdogan, a Danish politician, was the first panellist. Formerly a freelance journalist, she was elected as a member of the Folketing for the Social Democratic Party in Denmark. She pointed out that protest and populist movements have been transformed into right wing parties competing for national constituencies and seats in parliament. She showed how such parties are trying to win the favours of voters by quoting the example of the Danish Nationalist Party. This party focussed from the very beginning on some apparently 'simple' core issues and problems, in this case Muslim immigrants. The messages and images they use are plain but emotionally charged. So the question Akdogan asked was if media and citizenship education can strengthen the intellectual capacity of citizens (especially young citizens) in order to resist such appealing slogans.

Undoubtedly media play an increasingly important role; media professionals and journalist should be aware of the fact that they have a responsibility for civil society and the (democratic) political culture.

At the same time, we have to find ways of bridging the 'gap' between democratic politicians and the 'masses'. Akdogan underlined that the classical parties are increasingly unable to

reach the working classes in Denmark. As a way out or a possible remedy she recommended 'deliberate democracy' – in order to enhance communication between citizens and politicians. People have to get the feeling that they are listened to and that their opinion on issues makes a difference. Akdogan argued that by organizing regular consultations with citizens a kind of incentive for political or citizenship education could be created. The concrete recommendations Akdogan made were:

- more transparency and less bureaucracy on the EU Level,
- to give the people the power to decide by themselves for themselves,
- work more intensively on culture – music, film and theatre can be a successful mediator,
- exchange more students and
- don't overestimate the internet as media - it is egalitarian as it presupposes that one can use the internet.

Anja Besand, the second panellist, started her presentation by explaining the difference between the terms "popularity" and "populism". She elaborated the populist image with further examples taken from Germany, such as the "Schulhof CD" of the extreme rightwing party NPD, Schröder's participation in "Wetten, dass?!", a popular TV show. She then critically noted the fact that in Germany there is no clear distinction between popularity and populism and made the point that legitimacy is popularity.

Concerning civic education she spotted the tendency of rather avoiding the phenomenon of media populism and popular media altogether than deliberately turning to it and making it part of the lessons at school. There is an overall ignorance of audiovisual media at schools although this kind of media is getting more and more popular amongst students. Besand presented evidence that just one percent of the teachers in Germany talk with their students about media. She criticized the perception among civic education teachers that print media are more 'objective' (or better) than audio-visual media. Civic education, she concluded, should be open towards all media phenomena and should include a critical evaluation of the new media in its curriculum.

The third speaker, **Hajo G. Boomgaarden**, presented results of his research on media's impact on public attitude. His input began with illustration of the relationships between media, the public and politics presented as a triangle. He stressed that mass media have a central position as intermediary between politics and citizens. He outlined populist trends visible both on the left and on the right wings of political parties system in many European countries. Boomgaarden emphasized that we are facing public reluctance towards European integration, the so-called euroscepticism. Populist parties make use of that. The parties on the right wing, which are based on the ideology of nationalism and anti-immigration, attack the EU for easing immigration and 'undermining' national identity. The left wing parties see the EU primarily as a vehicle for economic liberalization and a reduction of welfare politics out of their fear of globalization.

Due to the fact that mass media have a central position, the question about their role in the rise of populism emerges. Do mass media affect public attitudes and promote populism? Do they support populist parties on the fringes of the ideological spectrum? Do they promote the anti-European message of populist parties? They don't and they do, implied Boomgaarden. Media can and sometimes do act responsibly, and show signs of active reflection of their role in society. But sometimes media report on political events uncritically, without awareness of potential consequences of this "normal" media coverage. And sometimes they are even actively engaged in promoting political populism, through media populism.

Boomgaarden suggested that different approaches towards media, politics and the public could be pursued to make a change possible.

- Media and journalists should be made aware of their role, their social responsibility and of the effects the media content has on the public. They should be reminded of existing codes of ethics they are also supposed to obey.

- The public should acquire more media literacy. Media, just like the public, is fond of simplicity, conflict and negativity. Media and journalism are market driven and have to survive in a difficult economic environment. The public should be aware of all that.

Following these presentations the workshop discussed central recommendations for Civic Education regarding:

- **Integration of all kinds of media in Civic Education.**

The participants agreed on the need of reform on this point especially in schools. Teachers should be encouraged and trained in using audio-visual and the Internet for educational purposes. The psychological moment of uncertainty about personal incompetence concerning media should be overcome by frequent and intensive training for teachers.

- **Increasing the awareness of journalists about the impact of their work on society.**

The work of a good journalist is called “investigative journalism” – collecting reliable, objective information with a “clearing up” character. But reality is different. Many journalists are not aware of the impact of their work and their responsibility for society – this concerns both representatives of the boulevard and the high-quality press. Nearly every article has a specific political direction or intention. The problem is that it is increasingly difficult to distinguish *facts* from the (*judging*) *opinion* of the author. Research shows that people are manipulated by the media without even noticing it.

Finally, the participants agreed that initiatives that aim at overcoming media populism have to be started on both the local and the national level in order to have a positive spill over effect on the EU level. The EU can and should give incentives to start such initiatives.