

European Conference
1914-2014: Lessons from History?
Citizenship Education and Conflict Management

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Opening Address

By Thomas Krüger

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- The spoken word takes precedence -

Ladies and Gentlemen, dear colleagues,

It is a great pleasure for me to welcome you to this international meeting, NECE 2014, here in Vienna.

2014 is a very special year:

It is a year of European remembrance: One hundred years ago European diplomacy failed miserably – not least here in Vienna – and the world descended into what we call today the ‘Great War’. But 2014 is also a year of crises and warlike conflicts, a year in crisis mode for Europe and its neighbors in the East and in the Middle East. We are facing more challenges for citizenship education than ever. There could be no better time, I believe, for coming together for this conference.

Here in Vienna, we want to span a bridge from the European wars of the 20th century to the crises and conflicts in the 21st century. We are going to look back in order to think forward: We need new impulses for citizenship education in Europe – especially in times of international crises and conflicts. This will be the central issue of our conference.

Let me first say, however, that we are happy to be able to celebrate the 10th anniversary of our NECE Network here in Vienna. This well-filled auditorium shows that the interest in NECE is really growing. Congratulations!

From the beginning, NECE has been an open platform: It gives a voice to the many initiatives of an European civil society. And it allows for transnational exchange and work on joint projects, for example in our focus groups. You have all been playing an important role in the success of NECE, NECE lives of your participation. So please regard yourselves as ‘co-producers of NECE’ – and of this conference. Our partners from the Netherlands, from Poland, Slovenia, the Czech Republic and from Austria also have a large part in the success of the network. I thank you all and I thank, last but not least, the lab concepts agency, Anja Ostermann and her ‘lab ladies’ from Berlin – without this logistical backbone NECE wouldn’t be what it is today. And let me also thank my colleagues in the Federal Agency for Citizenship Education, the managers of the NECE Project, Petra Grüne and Christoph Müller-Hofstede. Ladies and Gentlemen, this was our commercial break; Thank you for listening.

Ladies and gentlemen,
 when we look around us, crises in Europe, the Ukraine and the Middle East follow in quick succession. These often-tragic events leave many of us helpless or simply overwhelmed. The more important it seems to me to pause for a moment, to look at the situation and ask: What are we doing – and why?

Two main questions will be the focus of our conference:

Firstly, are there lessons from Europe’s history in the twentieth century? Or is the British historian Taylor right in saying – I quote –: “The only thing that we can learn from history is that people never learn from history”? – End of quote –

Secondly, how can citizenship education in Europe react to the large number of new conflicts and crises? Do we need to review our patterns of thinking, our methods and strategies when dealing with crises and conflicts today?

Let me – very briefly – outline three propositions:

First proposition:

Citizenship education needs history. When you neglect or ignore history you will not understand the present and you will not be able to shape the future. I can see two good arguments for this claim: The first has been pointed out by Sir Adam Roberts, the renowned British political scientist and President of the British Academy: In a public lecture in London he sharply criticized the increasing tendency to imagine ourselves somehow living ‘beyond history’. The paradigm of the “end of history” (Francis Fukuyama) at the end of the Cold War, he believes, was followed by the a-historical rhetoric of a “new world order” by many if not most Western politicians. At first glance these formulas sound like attractive visions of liberation from history, an old wish of mankind, which also Karl Marx adhered to. But in the end – says Adam Roberts – they result in huge costs for the West; and – as he calls it – a “hangover of disappointed hopes” about Western interventions and politics in general. Our present situation is tightly connected with the neglect of history.

Another reason why we need history concerns the fundamental tasks of citizenship education. Citizenship education as a critical and enlightening authority will always strive to critically question power and power structures. History (and identity) always has been used for political ends here in Europe and in other parts of the world. “Identity is a dangerous word”, claimed the late American historian Tony Judt in one of his last essays. He warned of the dangers to withdraw to the “trenches of identity policy”. History, in that sense, is a dangerous word, too. Therefore, Citizenship education must deconstruct historical narratives and identify constructs as human-made and informed by the present. Citizenship education is not about getting involved in the politics of memory but about deconstructing it.

A central part of historical learning in citizenship education is looking behind the politics of memory and alerting citizens to the dangers of abuse. We must learn to understand history from a variety of angles in order to work together for a peaceful future. This is – unfortunately – as relevant today as it ever was. And it is no coincidence that we have invited you, dear Aleida Assmann, to be our first keynote speaker today.

Second proposition:

Looking at current conflicts and crises in the world, I think, we should take leave of eurocentrism also in citizenship education. We need a new awareness of our own ‘mental maps’ as Christopher Clark has called them, which inform our view of the world.

It is no coincidence that the term mental map has something to do with cartography. And our mental cartography is simply outdated as the Indian author Pankaj Mishra pointed out in his book ‘From the Ruins of Empire’. It dates from the 19th and early 20th century, when non-Western societies and nations were made the objects of colonial and imperialistic politics.

Our ancestors' feeling of superiority is still deeply engrained in the Western minds. The West, argues Mishra, must take leave of its narcissistic universalism. We need to look at and try to understand the experiences, the discourse – the mental maps as it were – of non-Western societies.

Let me give you just one example, which connects the present and the past, that is to say history, in a very impressive way:

China – as you all know – will become the biggest national economy in the world within the next decade. It will be the first non-Western, non-English-speaking and non-democratic nation on this position for more than 200 years. And when we look back to the First World War, we see this now so powerful China being ignored and sidestepped by the European powers and Japan. The decisions taken in Versailles after the war played a decisive role in the rejection of the West by Chinese intellectuals. As a consequence Lenin's ideas and the role model of the Russian Revolution became popular in China. As you all know, this is the sign under which the Communist Party of China is still ruling today. That shows us: Understanding our present is impossible if we ignore such global consequences of a seemingly European event.

Third proposition:

In a time of growing tensions and conflicts we should consider more thoroughly the foundations of politics, that is the conflicts of interests and their ideological and political justifications. There are two reasons for this, one of them of a principal nature: Citizenship education is in danger of becoming an 'empty and artificial process' – if we do not regard it as a political and even subversive authority, empowering participation and a critical review of power structures.

The second reason is linked to the global conflicts and the much-debated 'crisis of Europe' – both have changed the European Union in the last few years. The discourse about Europe has become more politicized – only think of the European elections and their results –, but also full of conflicts. The Ukrainian conflict has played an important role: The question whether we as Europeans are willing to champion our interests but also our values in confrontation with Russia, has opened the way, the „passage“ (to quote Luuk van Middelaar) to a more political Europe. Will this political Europe be able to cope with the new challenges surrounding us?

How should we, how can we react as citizenship educators with new ideas and new projects to these gripping developments? What recommendations will NECE 2014 give? What will our – your – mine – 'mental map' be after this conference?

I leave these as open questions to you. Thank you for your patience. I wish all of us an exciting and inspiring conference.