

NECE Conference 2015

‘Us’ and ‘Them’: Citizenship Education in an Interdependent World

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A conference report by Ivo Pertijs

‘Welcome home’. A warmer welcome you cannot expect when you enter a hotel, especially not when this message has a heart at the background. A careful look reveals that the heart is a group of people from all kind of countries. The real message to the visitors of the Makedonia Palace Hotel in Thessaloniki has been written under this human heart: #weareallrefugees. Thousands of refugees travel via Greece to other countries of the European Union. About 70 kilometres to the north of Thessaloniki many of them try to cross the border. “For all of us, the people of Makedonian Palace and PAOK FC, the strong emotions brought forth by the tragedy these people are experiencing are heightened by our own historical memories of similar tragedies experienced by our ancestors”, the hotel says in a statement.

‘Us’ and ‘them’

The main venue of this years’ NECE conference could hardly be closer to the theme of the conference: ‘us’ and ‘them’. Europe and the rest of the world are facing serious crisis forcing each other: political, financial and humanitarian. Often fingers are pointed at ‘Them’, but who are they? And who are we (‘Us’)? More than 300 people from Europe, North Africa, South Korea and the United States came to Thessaloniki to discuss citizenship education in an interdependent world. While some guests were still on their way to Greece, the first workshops took place with participants presenting their projects. Two British experts talked about the important issue of critical digital literacy and citizenship education in schools, while Polish experts showed a good practice of an anti-discrimination campaign. In another part of the building the participants watched a conversation at first without sound. They had to interpret what they saw before watching the same conversation again, but this time with sound as part of a workshop on intercultural citizenship awareness and readiness.

During many of these sessions the terms ‘them’ and ‘us’ were implicitly or explicitly mentioned. It was no coincidence that the organisers choose both words as the main theme of the conference. “We put ‘them’ and ‘us’ in quotation marks. During this conference we will be talking about these constructs and will debate about them from various viewpoints and backgrounds”, explained Sigrid Steininger of the Austrian Federal Ministry of Education and Women’s Affairs at official opening of the conference. “On this conference we put topics on the agenda that are at urge and of relevance for all our societies and for those people who

are active in the field of citizenship education at the same time”, said Petra Grüne of the German Federal Agency for Civic Education. “We all know that citizenship is not always high on the agenda. If you look at the national states or at a European level, there are ups and downs. Bringing all these people together is a way to support each other.” According to Marinko Banjac of the University of Ljubljana it is important to understand the causes of the binaries and the formation of them and us. He said that he was hoping the participants of the conference will gain knowledge through discussion, mingling and collaboration, knowledge that can be directly used. Moreover, he wanted the participants to gain or regain their activist attitude. “To get a little bit angry, and say ‘enough with the inequality’, ‘enough with all these problems’, et cetera.”

Identities

The necessity to discuss the notions of ‘them’ and ‘us’ could be felt among the participants. Citizenship experts of all kinds were present: teachers, academics, representatives of non-governmental organisations and those who work for a governmental institution. New thoughts come up when listening to someone who has a story to tell. José Casanova, one of the world’s top scholars in the sociology of religion, started his keynote speech with his personal story. “I grew up in Francoist Spain, an authoritarian regime isolated from the rest of Europe. I was fortunate as a young man to move to Austria, Innsbruck, to study theology. I am an American in Europe, but in America, I am from Europe. My wife happens to be from Ukrainian origin. I speak Ukrainian with my son, but he was born in New York City. I don’t have a European passport, but I feel very deeply a European citizen.” Nations are constantly being renewed and remade and new forms of ‘us’ and ‘them’ appear. “When I studied in Innsbruck, I used to work frequently in German factories and worked with *Gastarbeiters*. They were Turks. There were no Muslims in Germany. Nowadays there are only Muslims.” Mr Casanova compared the current negative attitudes in Europe towards Muslims with the anti-Catholicism in the United States in the past. “The Irish, Italians and Spaniards in the United States were Catholics. They represented Catholicism. And now people from Islamic countries are told that they are representing the ‘Islam’. This is a process of othering that is artificially constructed. This is a non-recognition of another person as a person.” Mr Casanova underlined that a democracy needs the bonding of ‘we’, the people. “We need solidarity and to share things. We share the resources of the country. We pay taxes. Some pay more, some pay less. We share those kind of things that ‘they’ should get also, like open access to education and health. This is what ‘we’ and a member of ‘we’ means.”

Greek case

For those who were still not triggered enough, Christina Koulouri of the Panteion University of Political and Social Sciences made an impressive statement. “The conference is more or less based on the assumption that Europe is ‘us’ and them are the immigrants and refugees. We should look inside Europe to understand the mechanisms of othering. It is important to understand the widespread stereotypes between Eastern and Western Europe, but during recent years we have witnessed the stereotyping between Northern and Southern Europe. The whole process of othering doesn’t only concern Europe as a whole versus external others, but paradoxically it also concerns relations inside Europe”, Ms Koulouri said. She used the Greek case to present the process of othering by showing an image of graffiti on a wall in Athens: our grandparents were refugees, our parents immigrants and we are racists. “It is important to clarify the historical events behind this graffiti. The grandparents were the refugees in 1922 with the Asia Minor Catastrophe, the Greek as immigrants refers to the migration to Western countries, and we are racists refers to the presence of the Golden Dawn. In the end of the 20th century, Greek turned from a country of exporting people to a country importing people like economic migrants and refugees. The Athenian graffiti encapsulates the ambivalence of the Greek society to the newcomers.” The Greek case

shows that the debate about citizenship has to be analysed and understood in a historical perspective. This thought made the participants start thinking about their own countries.

All roads lead to Thessaloniki

Bringing so many people together is a complicated matter, but when an airport shuts down, people are running inevitably late. As a consequence, the president of the German Federal Agency for Civic education had to hold his opening speech at the second day of the conference. He travelled by car from Bulgaria to Greece. “Thinking of borders as a European today, I see images of wires, police and even military forces, and of women and children that have gone through hardship to get a better future in Europe. Our crossing from Bulgaria to Greece was very peaceful, yet, we all know this is a deceived peace.” Mr Krüger said that the refugee crisis forces us to adopt a new way of thinking. “We cannot remain on the side lines. Conflicts elsewhere that displace millions of people are also our conflicts. Citizenship education in an interdependent world must be translated into political practice and social action – in joint projects across local and national borders.”

Like Thomas Krüger, Ulrike Guérot of the European Democracy Lab had to travel another five hours extra by car to get from Bulgaria to Thessaloniki. In her speech Ms Guérot said that Europe is a ‘she’. “This helps us to understand that Europe is a corporal body. If we talk about a Brexit and England is the left arm, Europe will be amputated. If we understand Europe as a body, everybody has its organic space and place.” According to Ms Guérot it is time for Europe to remember the cultural heritage and to think, conceive and shape Europe as a Republic in an institutional, societal and economic sense. “The French revolution gave us equality beyond classes. The peaceful revolution of the 21st century must ensure political equality beyond nation states. Europe as a political community should have tax equality, electoral equality and equal access to social rights.” After her speech Ms Guérot took part in one of the panel sessions. “I think the participants are well aware of the crisis mood. They are eager to get tools how to deal with the crisis, for example to better understand the dysfunctions of the EU-system and how to create awareness and responsibility. I found they had many prisms to approach the question of European identity.”

CLEAR

The term citizenship had already been mentioned often, but what do we mean if we talk about citizenship? Steven Stegers of the focus group CLEAR (Concept Learning for Empowerment through Analysis and Reflection) asked this question to the audience. “During the last focus group meeting that took place, we discussed with the group how to best present the method and agreed that it would be best to let the participants get a taste of the method by practicing this themselves. Because none of the team members had tried to implement the method with such a big group, we did not know how it would work in practice”, explained Stegers. All the participants had to create groups and to write down their notions related to for example the concept of ‘citizenship’, ‘solidarity’, ‘people’ or ‘terrorism’. The silence in the hall disappeared and a collective conversation about citizenship emerged. “In the end, I think we made the right decision, because I could see that all participants were engaged in the discussion”, said Stegers. After this session the definitions were collected and hung at the wall, offering the participants to get acquainted with a wide range of views on citizenship and other concept, which was inspiring and sometimes surprising.

In her speech Audrey Osler of the Norwegian Buskerud and Vestfold University College said she understands citizenship as a status, as a feeling and as a practice. “When you talk about citizenship as a status and you refer this to a nationality or passport, than it is exclusive, but if we can also look at another status, that of human rights, which is an inclusive status. But citizenship is much more than a status, it’s also feeling that you belong to a group or you feel

excluded. I work in Norway, do I feel like I belong there? If people treat me like a stranger or outsider, I am not going to feel welcome. But citizenship is also practice, what we do. It could be engagement in the community, on the national or on the international level”, Ms Osler explained. She argued that in Europe democracy itself is fragile. “We have to build this into our citizenship curriculum, to examine the fragility. We have great concerns about far right activists, racists, and Islamophobic and anti-Semitic views which are incompatible with democratic principles.” Ms Osler said that the first thing teachers have to ask themselves in a class room is which views are allowed space and which views are considered to be antidemocratic? She underlined that we often react in the ‘them’ and ‘us’ way by teaching about a human rights heaven and a human rights hell. Many European countries believe they live in the human rights heaven where everything is good. The ‘other’ comes from a human rights hell. “We look at human right violations in distant places, rather than examining critically some of the challenges of human rights issues in our own neighbourhood and in our own nation.”

Panel sessions

In the afternoon three parallel panels were dealing with urgent issues: Russia, Ukraine and the West, the dynamics and the functioning of othering in the European crisis, and the perceived conflict between ‘the West’ and ‘the Islamic world’. Experts discussed these matters with each other and the audience to generate topics and questions that are relevant for practical citizenship education. “What surprised me was the intensity of debate on how geopolitics is complicating the job of civic education”, says Chris Burns. He moderated the panel on Russia, Ukraine and the West. “There were emotions on both sides of the divide in Ukraine, even among civic educators. It requires more dialogue and training, even among civic educators. And especially of Ukrainian teachers, who are living in the conflict. A huge challenge that must be taken on.”

Almut Möller of the European Council on Foreign Relations moderated the panel ‘Where now for Europe?’. “There was a strong sense that the European Union continued to be in crisis, and that both in terms of its values as well as with regard to concrete policies the European idea was continued to be undermined. The impact of the euro crisis continues to be felt and the latest migration crisis has put yet another pressure point on the EU and its members”, explains Ms Möller. “What was striking to me was the extent to which I felt the conversation in the United Kingdom was already far away from what is discussed in continental Europe, in particular the euro and migration. Also, there was a strong sense that the crisis was fundamentally political, while it often felt as if the EU conceived it as of merely economic or technical nature.”

The third panel carried the title ‘The ‘West’ and the ‘Islamic World’’. In this panel the context of five countries were presented: France, Germany, Egypt, Denmark and Tunisia. “This allowed to highlight the spectrum of an issue often portrayed as homogenous. How the challenge of ‘othering’ is to be tackled at all levels since it infused in country histories, current politics, media and national curriculum even in old democracies”, says moderator Nelly Corbel of the French Lazord Foundation and Member of the Focus Group “Exchange between Europe and North Africa”. “The main issue which came about is the urgency for us civic education actors to identify new terminology to refer to the issue of ‘West and Islam’ which does not carry such dichotomy in its essence and actually describes the referred tension in an accurate manner.”

Workshops

In the workshops that started after the panels the three themes were worked out in detail. It sometimes remained hard to find concrete solutions on the level of citizenship education as geopolitical discussions and interpretations pop up every time. Veszna Wessenauer of the Hungarian Tom Lantos Institute participated in the workshop on refugees in Europe and how to prevent unfair stereo-typing by citizenship education. “There was little discussion going on about the citizenship education itself and when we, the speakers were asked about how our countries are responding to the refugee crisis in terms of education, the panel didn’t really give exact answers and good practices were just a few. We all know a lot of classic integration practices through sports and culture, but if we want to be honest with ourselves, we all know that civil society won’t be able to handle this all alone and responsibility lies with the states on the first place. Unfortunately not all countries have a body like bpb.” The refugee crisis and the change of borders were mentioned often in various workshops. “I find the idea very interesting that borders have been changing all the time in history and every people has been a refugee at least once. I am going to use this as a starting point for my workshops for Hungarian college students about xenophobia and migration”, says Anikó Fischer of the Hungarian organisation Migration Aid. “I have also stated, that the most effective solution to solve the increasing xenophobia in Hungary is to establish and widen civic education, like the German example, as rapidly as possible. For that a general change of the educational system is also indispensable. This will be my aim and challenge in the upcoming years, in which I am going to dedicate all of my efforts!”

Numerous amounts of other issues were presented at the workshops, for example the role of the media and reporting on the European crisis, preventing othering processes in citizenship education, and how citizenship educators can react to the radicalisation of youth. Sometimes theoretical frameworks formed the basis of a workshop, while in other workshops very concrete examples of good practices were presented. By bringing people with various backgrounds and from different countries together, a lot of new ideas and views emerged from the workshops. Even new workshops were created by the participants that very same day to discuss matters they believed deserved special attention. “With the open workshop we had a chance to discuss the issue of anti-systemic movements”, says Mariana Assenova of the Bulgarian cross media production company E80. The topic of the conference, which was the point of focus in all the workshops, struck the attention of Ms Assenova. “This is a burning topic in my home country too. The migrant flood brings to rise the nationalistic voices in my country and all over Europe. The organizers of the NECE conference were again successful in bringing this difficult topic to deep and sincere discussion by inviting relevant speakers”, says Ms Assenova. She also appreciated the fact that there was no real border between the participants and the invited speakers who often took part in the workshops.

World café

What’s next? This question was posted at the end many workshops the previous day. The participants were eager to transform fruitful discussions into practical projects or citizenship instruments. Centred around concrete themes like ‘self-check tool for citizenship education’, ‘disruptive means to enhance citizen participation’, ‘choice for appropriate participants for active citizenship projects’ or ‘historic karma’ the participants continued their brainstorming process trying to find out what is needed to make a the idea a practical success. The energy could be felt at numerous tables, showing the strength of exchanging viewpoints and experiences. Potential threats were determined, potential challenges notified. At was a very useful way to bundle forces before everyone would return to his or her hometown. Susanne Ulrich, one of the conference moderators, called the world café one of her highlights of the conference. “The enormous ambition of the participants in the world café... I was really overwhelmed how much outcome has been generated in such a short time!” Before it was

time to say goodbye, an impressive keynote speech was held by Lizzie Doron. The Israeli writer explained what it means to be 'them' and 'us' in Israel, how she was forced to speak Italian (while not knowing this language) to cover her Jewish identity or how her Palestinian friend was approached by her Jewish friends. The speech showed once more 'them' and 'us' is neither a European phenomenon nor a phenomenon from the past, but a real-time issue that should be addressed all around the world.

Inspiration!

After several days of conversations, debates and exchange of knowledge, the participants returned home with new ideas about citizenship education. For many, the conference was a source of energy and inspiration. "I was somewhat familiar with the network having previously presented at a HTR forum meeting in Leicester back in 2013. However, I must say that having now participated in the full conference I am hugely inspired by the shared focus on addressing issues of social cohesion and discrimination through education", says Tom Campbell of the Fullhurst Community College (UK). Among the things he brought away from the conference were a book full of contacts, some new friends and an insight into why there is often a disconnect between theory and practice, with some potential solutions for closing this gap in his work. Mr Campbell: "I have also got a sense of 'European Citizenship' which I had never experienced before seeing the key issues of 'othering' across different cultures. This form of European collaboration provides significant resource to tackle real social issues."

"The conference needed more speakers from the Middle East and the Arab countries, the so called 'others'", believes Dalia Assem of the Egyptian volunteer based organisation Oreed. She found opportunities at the conference and talked with academics. "I got really good ideas for projects and a very good network out of the conference. I was invited to different events and programs that will be of use for my work in civil society as well as for my research." Dora Katsamori of the University of Peloponnese will remember the very beautiful moments she shared with people who she knew or who she just met. "The exchange of experience and personnel thoughts, the beautiful feeling of socializing with people who have the same interests and the same visions like you", says Ms Katsamori. Getting inspired by others is a valuable good. "It was a personal highlight to speak to so many different people from all over Europe. Since all of these people are involved either in citizenship education, research or politics, it is a great chance to discuss current challenges from multiple perspectives", says Max Behrendt of the German initiative Dialogue at School. "I have received valuable information regarding local projects in Berlin working on issues such as the stigmatization of the Roma community. Moreover, I have had fruitful debates with academic researchers about the pro and cons of citizenship education." According to Steven Stegers of EUROCLIO, the NECE conference is a unique space for professionals in civic education to meet, think, exchange and work together. "Although I participated in one of the NECE focus groups, I did not participate before in the conference, but certainly intend to come back next year", says Mr Stegers. "The thing I like most is that the participants are coming from such diverse backgrounds. This, combined with the fact that the participants share common goals, creates an environment for fruitful exchanges."