

Expert Debate
Perspectives for non-formal Citizenship Education
in Central, Eastern and Southeastern Europe

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Notes and reflections

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In April 2009, MitOst Association co-operated with the "Networking European Citizenship Education" platform (NECE) to bring together specialists from across Europe at Prague's City Hall for an expert debate on the perspectives of non-formal citizenship education in Central, Eastern and Southeastern Europe.

Non-governmental actors indisputably have a key role to play in transforming societies—including their education systems—in Central, Eastern and Southeastern Europe. The necessity and potential of their contribution is, however, not yet fully recognised in the area of citizenship education – a field concurrently bestowed with grand expectations and confronted with numerous challenges.

With many former socialist societies moving closer to Europe—and several of them having become members of the European Union in 2004 and 2007—citizenship education in the region is certainly being Europeanised: the Union has not only become a catalyser, but an almost exclusive focal point of change and development.

At the same time, the last two decades have also witnessed an increase in diversity of citizenship education. Non-formal projects and concepts—owing to, in part, the equivocal reputation of state structures in most countries—have noticeably enriched and strengthened the field in complementarity to institutionalised formal education.



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Setting up the framework for democratic citizenship

At the Prague debate, the assembled experts observed that—despite the emerging non-formal diversity—the field of citizenship education in Central, Eastern and Southeastern Europe remains marked by a nearly complete absence of non-partisan actors, often a direct consequence of a lack of truly independent civil society structures in the region.

In an atmosphere of deeply rooted mistrust of political elites by significant parts of the citizenry, the scarcity of participatory arenas represents one of the most enigmatic dilemmas of non-formal citizenship education. How to respond to the current challenges in the field when access to participation is so profoundly erratic?

Consequently, many actors of non-formal citizenship education struggle in finding a balance between an educational approach that is based on empowerment and understands citizens as agents of change, on the one hand, and the predicament that there are hardly any protected spaces in which citizens can enact their own agency, on the other hand. How can questions of power be re-negotiated when there is no willingness to share power?

And yet, democracy is not something that can only be taught – it needs to happen. The stark contrast between the heroic principles of the idea and the meek opportunities of current reality in many countries of Central, Eastern and Southeastern Europe remains the largest quandary of citizenship education. Citizens refuse—and who could blame them?—to be educated for playing an active part in democratic life if this very life provides little prospect to exercise their rights meaningfully.

This discrepancy cannot be resolved by—formal or non-formal—citizenship education, but it, quite obviously, cannot just be ignored either. European initiatives and associations, among them MitOst and the NECE network, provide supportive frameworks for exchange and reflection on the dilemmas and the perspectives of non-formal citizenship education. In doing so, they complement the role of the Council of Europe, which provides such a framework for formal citizenship education through its network on education for democratic citizenship and human rights.

Promising examples under difficult conditions

At the Prague debate, several examples of non-formal citizenship education were highlighted in which a timely combination of a connected group of citizens, a shared need for change and an empowerment project led to successful initiatives or campaigns. The positive impact of these examples had rarely been intended and was often ascribed to a serendipitous set of circumstances – an understanding that seems representative for the somewhat humble underestimation that many actors of non-formal citizenship education appear to share in relation to their own work and its potential.

But as powerful and motivating as such beacons of citizen empowerment and participation can be, the experts agreed that non-formal citizenship education suffers from the absence of appropriately supportive conditions – ranging from a general lack of recognition and constricted media access to the nonexistence of independent networks and the prevalent denial of reliable financial support.

Partnerships between formal and non-formal actors of citizenship education were generally seen as potentially rewarding for the cause and for both sides involved. There seems to be, however, widespread hesitation about such partnerships: as long as institutions of formal education are governed by generations of teachers that were not yet educated in democracy or not yet educated by teacher-trainers conditioned by democracy—a situation described as a "postponed educational revolution" by one expert—the fear of manipulation tends to prevail.

This hesitation to engage in cross-sectoral partnerships, and the aforementioned lack of participatory power observed and felt by many citizens, has led to a situation in which citizenship is often addressed through its cultural or social dimensions, leading to what an expert described as a “disregard and disdain for anything political”.

Europe – a true alternative or an evasive dream?

There is—to complement the picture—little encouragement provided by national or regional frameworks for citizenship education, which have no intention to facilitate any challenge to the established system. In return civil society has, to a large extent, become a depoliticised sphere of public discourse at national level, with open debate and reflection currently almost only possible in European contexts such as provided by the Prague Debate.

Whether and how the experiences of other European countries, with their specific traditions of citizenship as well as political education, can provide an empowering, yet not overpowering, contribution to the emergence of public spaces for meaningful discourses—discourses that include and no longer shy away from political aspects—remains one of the crucial questions of non-formal citizenship education in Central, Eastern and Southeastern Europe, to which MitOst will return at a workshop on Citizenship Education in the context of Lifelong Learning in co-operation with the NECE network in autumn 2009.