

1914 – 2014: Conflicts and The Role of Citizenship Education in Conflict Management and Resolution

A preparatory workshop for the NECE Conference in Vienna 2014

30 March – 1 April 2014
Belgrade, Serbia

Opening Statement

By Thomas Krüger

President of Federal Agency for Civic Education (Germany)

- The spoken word takes precedence -

Dear Dejan Ubovic, Dear colleagues,

Thanks for your welcome and your hospitality, dear Dejan Ubovic, here in the KC Grad. I am delighted to join this meeting. Let me welcome all of you on behalf of the NECE Initiative and our partners. Many thanks to the Robert Bosch Foundation for their generous support as well as to the KC GRAD, the Goethe Institute Belgrade and last but not least the Civic Initiatives.

This is the first workshop of the NECE Initiative in Belgrade – a European city outside of the European Union still largely unknown to the wider public in many member states. I hope that this will change once we have concluded this workshop.

Why are we here? What is the purpose and aim of our meeting? Let me confine myself to a few remarks on the purpose of this workshop.

First of all, this workshop is one of many workshops and conferences and other activities, which are part of our NECE Initiative. With partners from Germany, the Netherlands, Austria, Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovenia and other individual and institutional supporters we promote a new and transnational form of citizenship education for Europe. Conferences, workshops and online tools help us create a much-needed transnational public space for experts, activists, young citizens and citizenship educators all over Europe. As NECE is still in the making we are always looking for new collaborators and partners. That's why we are happy to present NECE here in Belgrade, too.

Secondly, we hope this workshop can serve as a testing ground or a laboratory for ideas and topics for our next NECE Conference in Vienna in October.

In Vienna, we are going to look at the chances and the role of citizenship education for the resolution of conflicts – on a local, national or international level. And we will use the centenary of the First World War as a reference point.

Adam Krezminski, the well known Polish historian and journalist, has reminded us that this centenary in August 2014 surely is one of the anniversaries which may enable us to discuss and re-define nothing less than the entire 20th century and its catastrophes. When we think of August 1914 we should also think of the crossing of the Weichsel by German troops only 25 years later in 1939, which marked the beginning of the Second World War. And 60 years onwards – in 1989 – the fall of the Berlin Wall and the peaceful revolutions in Central Europe changed the landscape of our continent yet again.

What does this mean for citizenship education?

One example could be this workshop, which takes the First World War as a starting point for looking into the meaning of this catastrophe for the problems and conflicts in today's Europe. Simply put: Talking about the past always also says something about the presence and the future.

But once you start talking about the past you get into tricky terrain because we know only too well that history and the narration and remembrance of history is a construction. It differs enormously not only among individuals (as we know) but also among nations and other collective agencies.

To cite an example: the First World War as Germans call it – is remembered in England and in France as the 'Great War' or 'la grande guerre'. The German classification World War **ONE** and **TWO** was accepted only reluctantly by our neighbours. And with good reason: French losses between 1914 and 1918 were immense and the British lost more of their people than during the entire World War II. Look at Russia and you will discover that the First World War memories are almost completely replaced by memories of the Great Patriotic War in the 1940s. And surely in Poland the end of the war in 1918 signified nothing less than the revival of the nation.

And here in Serbia we have yet again an altogether different discourse on this war – often disputed and in conflict with other narratives in Europe.

Memories and the political discourse on history and the past are a dangerous game and can disrupt not only the fabric of societies but also spark international conflicts. If you look at the risks coming out of historical disputes you will certainly rate the discussion and recognition of disputed memories as highly as treaties, a common currency and open borders.

Thirdly let me conclude on a quick note regarding the actual international context of this workshop and the meaning of the Crimea crisis for our work.

When we started planning this workshop half a year ago we could not even imagine that one hundred years after the outbreak of World War I, the question of war and peace, of unity and division of our continent would once again be raised in Europe. The comparison with 1914 inevitably comes to mind in this anniversary year. But are these historical parallels and comparisons justified? Have a look at the differing geopolitical constellations and you will see they are **not**: At that time, two central powers faced a trio of world empires on Europe's eastern and western peripheries. Today, a broad coalition of western and central European states is united in protesting against Russia's interventions in Ukraine. And the restless, ambitious German Kaiserreich of 1914 scarcely resembles the European Union, a multi-state peace framework that has developed a diplomatic culture of caution and restraint.

Interestingly, Germany's foreign minister, Frank Walter Steinmeier, and Christopher Clark, author of the famous and disputed book 'The Sleepwalkers', developed a new narrative on the need for diplomacy and the European Union in a recent discussion in Berlin. I do think there are some clues in this narrative for civic educators as well.

Both pointed out that we are wiser now than one hundred years ago.

To be very brief: **No sleepwalking into a great war any more – thanks to the European Union and its learning capabilities and de-escalation mechanisms.**

So we can conclude that learning from history and a new European narrative has really been happening in the middle of Europe. Awareness of the mistakes made one hundred years ago can help us find a new position regarding today 's conflicts.

On that note, I wish us all a successful and creative search for new positions and ideas today and tomorrow.

Thank you for your attention!