



N E C E

★ NETWORKING EUROPEAN CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION

The Impact of Cultural and Citizenship Education on Social Cohesion

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Opening Remarks

by

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Dear Mr Banyš, dear Mr Damijonaitis, Ladies and Gentlemen,

On behalf of the Federal Agency for Civic Education in Germany and of our co-operation partners I am glad to welcome you here in Vilnius to our annual NECE conference focussing on “The Impact of Cultural and Citizenship Education on Social Cohesion”.

The institution I represent, the Federal Agency for Civic Education, is a public institution appointed to the Ministry of the Interior that was founded in 1952 with the task to promote and strengthen the democratic and the European idea “among the German people.”

Obviously, promoting European integration has always been an important issue of our work. And European and international topics became of rising importance during the last decades.

When international policy was on the agenda, anytime international scholars were invited to conferences and encounters between German and international experts were organised. For a long time, national issues were mostly regarded as national issues and were discussed from a German perspective among Germans. Also the discourses about the didactics of civic/citizenship education, about the challenges and conditions of this profession, the search for new and efficient approaches and methods as well as the struggle for appreciation of the importance of citizenship education for a long time has not been regarded to be an international issue. And the professional discourse was limited to the national context and was conducted within the national borders – not only in Germany.

But things are changing: In the middle of the 1990s we started to organise regular conferences for multipliers of citizenship education from all over Europe to discuss topics on the political agenda of the European Union – like for example currency or migration policies. These conferences were already organised with our partner the Austrian Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture and the IPP Amsterdam. We established NECE in the year 2004 to provide and secure a regular forum for exchange and discussion between governmental and nongovernmental institutions. This platform focuses on the challenges and the developments of the profession of citizenship education in Europe. We started the initiative for several quite obvious reasons.

Just to mention a few: In times when societies are facing problems (like climate change) that cannot be solved on the national level anymore, the nation state cannot continue to be the only point of reference for citizenship education anymore, so we have to affiliate our ideas of citizenship with the ideas of cosmopolitan citizenship and European citizenship.

A few days ago, the Lisbon Treaty has been ratified. We all witnessed the difficult process that finally led to this important step: a process that has always been connected with discussions about the relationship between the European Union and its citizens. A discussion about the need for a notion of European citizenship that is not restricted to formal membership and formal rights and duties but that includes the feeling of belonging, the readiness for cultural and political participation and struggles for interests in a European public sphere. In many “whitebooks” and with several programmes, the European Union has also emphasized the importance of citizenship education in the member states within this context. But one question remains: Can citizenship education really contribute sustainably to a European citizenship without co-operation and exchange

of concepts and approaches and without establishing a European professional public sphere of citizenship education? I do not think so.

Last but not least and this links to the topic of the recent conference: Mainly influenced by international processes, citizenship education in different European countries is facing similar challenges and similar expectations in the respective national context.

Before the rising of the economic crisis, European societies were already confronted with developments that demanded efforts to strengthen social cohesion. The rising complexity of societies, the increasing number of lifestyles and social milieus, the number of different parallel existing cultures and subcultures, populations of growing heterogeneity with different geographical, ethnical or religious background and rising levels of inequalities of wealth, the marginalisation of groups, the appearance of new forms of extremism or fundamentalism and so on.

I think it is no coincidence that in Germany the Ministry of the Interior now established social cohesion as a cross-sectoral task and emphasizes the role of citizenship education within this context. Therefore, it is no coincidence that the worries about the situation of social cohesion in the Dutch society led to the governmental initiative to establish a house of democracy as a new strong institution of citizenship education in The Hague. In addition to these two examples, I think there is no doubt that social cohesion is an important challenge for European civil societies, politics and for our profession. But do we all refer to the same concept of social cohesion, what are the main tasks, what could be the contribution of citizenship education and where does citizenship education come to its limits? These are issues that we regard worth, while discussing it on this years NECE conference.

We also decided to dedicate this conference not only to the discussion about citizenship education but also to the impact of cultural education. There also exist initiatives of artists and cultural institutions that manage to reach target groups that are hard to reach for citizenship education, as well as cultural approaches that had respectable effects on social inclusion or on the mobilisation of marginalised groups.

If you observe the situation in major European cities and assume that the cities are on the one hand nucleus points of social developments and on the other hand laboratories for the future, you recognise a rising importance of culture as means of the expression of group interest, as means of struggle for resources or as means of protest and participation. There seems to emerge a rising importance of cultural expressions while traditional political expressions and forms of participation like the membership in a party suffer from decreasing acceptance. Another reason for us to have a closer look at these phenomena and bring professionals from citizenship education, cultural education and arts together to explore their respective possible impact on social cohesion and to discuss possible synergies at the interface of both fields.

And this is not going to be easy – I know by personal experience – because there are different cultures coming together with different expectations, speaking different languages even if they are coming from the same country – sometimes you have the impression to observe a clash of civilisations. It is never easy but, as we all know, diversity can serve as an enormous driving force for creativity. And which place would be more suitable for this discussion than the recent European capital of culture.

In this sense I would like to thank our co-operation partners, especially our partners here in Lithuania: the Center for Adult Education and Information (Mr Tadas) and the House of Europe (Ms Juditha Akromiene). I thank you Mr Banys, to be our host this evening, and I am thankful that we have such interesting and experienced speakers for tonight: Phil Wood and Richard McNicol, thank you for having accepted our invitation. And last but not least, I would like to thank the Ministry of Education, in person Mr. Damionjaitis who is going to speak to us now.

Have a nice and interesting conference. Thank you.