



Citizenship Education Facing Nationalism and Populism in Europe

Strategies - Competencies – Practices

Report

Workshop 3: Minority Issues: Are Roma, Immigrants and Muslims Europe's New Scapegoats?

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The overall objective of the workshop was 'to discuss theoretical and political approaches to an innovative role of citizenship education' in the public debate on minority problems that form part of the variegated interests in a pluralistic society. Three central questions served as points of departure for the workshop participants:

- Recognition and differences: how can the protection of (religious and cultural) minority rights best strike a balance with the neutrality of the state?
- Do we have to develop special citizenship education methods and approaches for minorities?
- What do we have to do to drive forward the European/transnational project of citizenship education?

Mrs. Ilona Tomova, started her presentation by posing the question of why Europeans are using Roma, Muslims and immigrants as the main scapegoats in their societies. She attempted to answer it from the viewpoint of the interactions between these particular groups and the "indigenous" European populations throughout history. All three groups are considered salient in this debate on stereotyping, marginalisation and discrimination; the reasons for this societal dislike can be sought in the fact that they are relatively powerless within society and are largely underrepresented in various public institutions.

She raised the question why (based on statistical evidence and polls) stigmatization, stereotyping and scapegoating were stronger in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) than in Western Europe. The basic reasons for this difference, she argued, are *stronger frustration as a result of the deteriorated quality of life during the period of post-communist transition; stronger ethnocentrism, nationalism, and symbolic conflicts; stronger demographic fears; weak civil society and lack of democratic traditions; reinforcement of bad social learning models through the media, political representation and promotion.*

In addition, macroeconomic conditions also have an impact on the negative attitudes towards minorities, as macroeconomic data from around the region show. To a very large extent it has to do with the competition for jobs as well; the data on labour force participation, employment and unemployment, cited by Mrs. Tomova, establishes a strong link with ethnic issues.

The following are some of the major (sometimes mutually exclusive) points of view expressed and elaborated by the participants:

- When one talks about minority, we have to think of citizenship rights, which are formally and largely acknowledged in Europe.
- Attention in the future should be paid not only to the East-West division, but also to the North-South dimension when analysing the negative attitudes towards ethnic and religious minorities.
- The idea of representation was expounded as to whether states should represent Roma, or Roma should represent themselves within the state.
- The critical role of the education system and its capacity to deal with minority issues properly was stressed. Very often, people are unaware that they have minorities in their countries and frequently take Roma for immigrants, and not as co-nationals.
- Quite often Roma do not want to keep their identity and language, but want to become part of the mainstream group and to identify with the majority.
- Romani culture, even when it is well developed, cannot be promoted because Roma people are generally poor.
- In multicultural societies, second generations of immigrants automatically identify with the mainstream. In this respect, if people want to identify with the mainstream, they should have the right to do so.

The second speaker, Mr. Valeriu Nicolae, focused exclusively on Roma minority issues. First, he gave a definition of anti-gypsyism as an ideology and a form of dehumanization. According to him, anti-gypsyism like any ideology 'can adapt as Roma remain targeted, regardless of the changes they make in their social status, living conditions and practices, as long as they admit their ethnic roots'. In his opinion, anti-gypsyism 'has such contempt for reason, facts, and intellectual debate that there is practically no effort put into justifying its often ideological changes – a thing that links it strongly to fascism'.

Afterwards, the floor was open for discussion. Some basic points that can be outlined as a result of the discussion are:

- There is a lot of (EU) money spent on Roma inclusion, but it can easily be misused and expended inappropriately. It is imperative, in this regard, to find effective mechanisms for utilising the money and monitoring its expenditure.
- Officials who are in charge of Roma issues at the EU level have never been to a Roma ghetto, a point made by Mr. Nicolae.
- Generally speaking, there is good legislation in most EU countries regarding human rights, but the law is not properly applied.
- European identity should be further promoted both among mainstream and minority groups as a possible means for decreasing the role of ethnic differences.
- At the level of national governments, history books should be revised in order to better deal with narrow views of national history and myths which abound in national historiographies.

In conclusion, the workshop participants proposed three recommendations on each of the three questions posed in the introduction.

- Human rights are for everyone individually but the legal system should be colour-blind. Individual rights are the basis for the right of each member of a collective entity or community within this entity or community.

- Citizenship education must follow a universal approach and universal principles but its methods and approaches should be adapted to the needs of minorities.
- Developing projects and initiatives at the European level is not enough and would not bring results unless they become part of the portfolio of a newly created European Commissioner for Minorities who has a mandate to push these on the EU agenda.

In view of the above, it can be concluded that citizenship education can be instrumental in dealing with minority issues and social inclusion. However, citizenship education has to reconsider and redefine its goals and methods in order to devise more focused and effective programs and curricula for and with minorities and immigrants. The theoretical institutional and political change management in this area will still take a lot of time.