

“Challenges and Perspectives of Citizenship Education in Central and South Eastern Europe”
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INPUT

Challenges and Chances of Citizenship Education in the Czech Republic

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When speaking about the situation of civic education in the Czech Republic, one has to consider several aspects:

1. Distrust resulting from the communist era

Education in political issues used to be an instrument of political indoctrination in the communist Czechoslovakia. It was an obligation, not only in schools but also during the professional life. The introduction of civic education is very difficult, but there is no doubt that it is needed in a modern democracy. That is why we could hardly use the term „political education“, used in Germany, and we try to establish the term “citizenship education”.

2. No consensus about the need of citizenship education

The difficulty of “citizenship education” is the lack of consensus about the relevance of such. Even 20 years after the democratic changes, education in general is still not a key issue in the Czech public debate. Public interest seems to be limited on the growth of the GDP, for example.

3. Subjects in schools are mostly Social Sciences not „democratic citizenship“

Of course, in schools “citizenship education” is a traditional subject, but usually it is rather understood in terms of “basics of Social Sciences”. In high-school students read Pierre Bourdieu or Adam Smith for example but they do not learn, how to have an open democratic discussion, how to deal with conflicts at school, how to read the newspaper or how to organise a public event.

4. No attempts to adult education

There are no programs for the education of adults in understanding and influencing public issues. This is an alarming situation – especially concerning the fact that probably more than 90% of the present Czech voters have attended totalitarian schools only.

5. Some attempts of state institutes – lack of conception and of clearly defined goals

There are several attempts initiated by the Czech state in recent years covering some of the topics of civic education, for example The Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes, which is doing good work. The problem is, that the institute cannot be sure about long-term financing. Consequently, planning future activities is difficult, but it would be absolutely necessary in order to reach their goals. Of course, politicians are reluctant to give up their control.

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6. Several NGO activities – only short time projects

The biggest part of the citizenship education was overtaken by the NGO-sector. Many excellent and also far reaching projects were realised. But – all these ventures were only projects, which means they were only financed by the EU for a short time. Applying for similar projects is almost impossible. These circumstances lead to a high number of innovative projects with very little chance of sustainability. The result is that there is no chance to coordinate the projects or to draw up a sustainable concept on how to develop civic education in general.

The Center for Citizenship Education

All the points mentioned lead us to the idea of establishing a stable institution, which would cover the whole area of citizenship education. Ondřej Liška's, Minister of Education (Green Party) involvement represented promised improvement. He has an NGO-background and knows the German system of political education as well. As we were speaking of it, last fall, we decided to try to establish a new Center for Citizenship Education, which would have both – stability through financial contribution of the state and an NGO-flexibility by free fundraising.

We have stated some basic rules for the new Center. It has to stand above all political parties, the German “Consensus of Beutelsbach” serves as a very good model for us. The Center should be a small and independent institute incorporated in the Masaryk University in Brno. (Those projects are much more challenging for Brno than for Prague.) The Center co-operates with the Masaryk University and the Czech Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports. The Center should be an initiating and coordinating actor in the field of civic education. It also should be a strong partner of the NGO-sector. By these attributes, we hope to create a stable and highly effective and innovative actor.

Some planned topics

1. Principles of democracy in the modern mass and media society

It is still necessary to explain the role of different institutions in democracy. But this role is not identified easily in the public space, where communication is disrupted by political advertisement and populism. It is necessary to empower the citizens in order to enforce more rational debate.

2. Social cohesion and inclusion

Another key issue of the Czech society is the relationship to the Roma-community, which in fact has been unsolved for twenty years. It is not a surprise because two years ago several dozens of ghettos of socially outcast Romas were discovered at the peripheries of our towns. Another issue is an increasing number of immigrants, which in the last five years almost doubled, at present immigrants account for ca. 5% of the population. After the expulsion of the Germans in 1945 and the separation from the Slovaks in 1993, the Czech society is simply not accustomed to sharing its country with somebody else.

3. Reflection of history

Facing the twenty year anniversary, many surveys show a shocking congruence of values of the older and the young generations. Growing up in democracy does not seem to have changed young people's attitudes. Despite being comparatively wealthy and cosmopolitan, the younger generation shares the indifference towards political affairs with their parents. Most of them simply do not care about politics and democracy. This seems to reflect the communist era and clearly shows the habits formed by the totalitarian regime.

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I am expecting many inspirations from this workshop because in my opinion citizenship education in South Eastern Europe was more advanced than in countries like the Czech Republic, Poland or Hungary: Civic education there was handled differently. Despite some differences, post-communism is the same illness in Central and South East Europe alike.