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Von Alicja Pacewicz

## **ENCOURAGING YOUNG POLES TO VOTE – Alicja Pacewicz**

### **1. CIVIC EDUCATION IN POLAND.**

In 1989 when Poland regained independence civic education in Poland practically didn't exist. Before the collapse of communism school was treated as an arena for the state propaganda. Obviously school is not the only provider of civic education – for my generation families, peer groups, local communities and church were the main sources of civic culture. Unfortunately – the experiences of long lasting rejection of official state, civil disobedience or even dissident movement do not translate easily into a positive version of civic culture and education. At the beginning there were no curricula, no textbooks, no credible teachers, no recent experiences to build on. This has changed quickly thanks to the efforts of both educational authorities and non-governmental organization (like the one I am working for).

Many civic education programs were developed, ranging from formal school curricula for all grades to minority rights projects or trainings for future lawyers. Now civic education has its prominent place in the national curriculum at the level of primary school (its elements are included in the subject *history and society*), middle school (subject *knowledge about society* - approx. 1 hour a week during 3 years of education) and high school (at least 2 hours a week in one of the 3 years). Students can even choose this subject when passing *matura* exam – the most important external examination in Polish system of education (like *baccalaureat* in France). There are dozens of textbooks and other publications, many teachers have gone through some sort of workshops.

And yet... Civic education is seen by many students, parents and even school directors or teachers as something less important than other subjects that give "real", hard knowledge. Teachers preach about democracy or transmit abstract information about political systems instead of teaching applicable knowledge and civic efficacy, preparing for active and informed participation in public life, helping to understand the complex connection between politics and economy.

Trust in political institutions is falling down systematically, the general satisfaction with democracy is not growing. Participation in elections is low – in 2000' presidential election it reached 61, 1%, in 2001' parliamentary election – 46, 3%, 2003' European referendum – 58, 8% and finally 2004' elections to The European Parliament – 20,8% ... Young people turn their backs on politics – they prefer their own circle of private friends than a big talk about democracy, civic values and participation. They are ready to mobilize their efforts but only when they see the clear reason to do so – e.g. during the European referendum in June 2003, or when they completely trust the altruistic intent of the public initiative – each year millions of young Poles take part in a one day public charity event organized by the former rockpresenter Jerzy Owsiak collecting millions of euros which are then used to finance medical equipment in the pediatric hospitals.

### **2. CENTER FOR CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION**

Established in 1994, the Centrum Edukacji Obywatelskiej (Center for Citizenship Education – CCE) is a non-governmental educational foundation. CCE promotes civic knowledge, practical skills and attitudes necessary in the building of a democratic state founded on the rule of law and civil society. CCE also operates a non-profit teacher-training institute registered with the Ministry of Education and Sports. In addition to developing innovative school curricula in the fields of civics, history, law and economic education and

introducing them into Polish schools, the Center for Citizenship Education is in charge of a range of activities targeting teachers, students and local authorities. These are our main programs:

**Civic Education at Local Government Schools (KOSS)** – a civic education project engaging students in active learning through discussions, simulations, case studies, individual and group projects. Currently, KOSS is the most frequently used civic curriculum in Polish middle schools (*gimnazjum*, for students aged 14-16): each year more than 350,000 students nationwide use our textbooks.

**Legal and Civic Education for Secondary Schools** – CCE has developed lesson scenarios and textbooks for secondary schools (*On a First-Name Basis with Democracy, A Young Citizen's Guide*). Together with the Central and Regional Examination Commissions, CCE has been developing standards that help students prepare for the National Secondary School Final Examination in Social Science.

**Young People's Civic Action** – a project preparing young people to effectively participate in public life. Students identify social problems affecting their local community and select the one they find to be the most acute. They collaborate to work out their own solution to the issue and persuade the relevant local authorities to implement their solutions. YPCA is a part of international 'Project Citizen', implemented in many countries all over the world.

**Traces of the Past** – students explore their own town and surroundings in order to discover interesting, though often neglected, buildings, places and others traces of the past. The students then "adopt" their chosen object – in other words, they dedicate themselves to taking care of it. In cooperation with local governments and local cultural institutions, students strive to restore the monuments they have adopted to their rightful place in their own communities.

**Young People Vote** – this project, in existence since 1995, aims at affording young people an opportunity to participate in democratic elections – the most important public event. As part of this program, students organize presidential and parliamentary elections in their schools, as well as referenda and constitutional debates.

**Students Against Corruption** – in cooperation with the Batory Foundation's program 'Against Corruption', and financial help of the Government of the USA, CCE develops lesson scenarios and trains educators how to teach about corruption, the threats associated with it as well as the means of fighting it. Consequently, students develop ideas on how they can become part of the anti-corruption movement.

**A School with Class** – a project implemented in cooperation with Poland's biggest daily *Gazeta Wyborcza* under the patronage of President Aleksander Kwaśniewski. It promotes the following principles: the school educates each student well; ensures fair assessment; teaches to think and understand the world; encourages involvement in social activities; helps the student develop self-confidence; prepares its students for the future. From 2002 to 2004 over 6 000 schools participated in the project activities.

**Trainings** – CCE organizes training courses for school principals, selected teachers or the whole teaching staff. It is focused on various areas of school work: civic and legal education and monitoring the quality of school operation. Some of our training courses are offered via the Internet.

**Publications:** CCE is involved in a broad range of publishing activities including lesson scenarios, methodological materials for teachers, selections of texts, resources and materials concerning educational policy, posters, and brochures that accompany individual programs. Textbooks are published by CCE's own publishing company CIVITAS.

**Website:** CCE operates a major Internet service for the benefit of teachers and students interested in social and political issues. It may be a source of valuable information and can also serve as a forum for discussion and experience sharing.

### 3. OUR EXAMPLE

**Young People Vote Program** started in 1995 just before the presidential election in which Lech Walesa (Solidarity leader) and Aleksander Kwaśniewski (now in presidential office) were competing neck to neck. The very idea of asking students about whom they would prefer for this post seemed controversial at that time – especially for the Ministry of education and school administration - and they openly rejected it, being afraid of the political involvement of the schools and their pupils. Nevertheless thousands of school directors, teachers and students decided to organize presidential elections in their schools and conducted specially designed lessons about the importance and mechanics of voting.

Since that time our Center has initiated and coordinated several elections and referenda, among them the referendum on the accession of Poland into European Union. In this event almost one million young Poles from 5000 schools from all over the country took active part. They were conducting lessons for their peers or younger colleagues about voting, they were organizing school commissions, distributing voting ballots, counting votes and sending the results to the headquarters of the Young People Vote Central Commission which had its office in our center. Young Poles had an opportunity not only to present their opinion about this historical decision but also to learn the rules of voting in Polish democracy – one man (or woman...) one vote, secret ballots, general and direct voting.

We also know that young people talk to their parents about candidates and other voting decisions and discuss the sense (or lack of sense) of casting the ballot. Our program is built on the assumption that such home political debates motivate adult voters to go to the voting poll. Unfortunately even our Young People Vote program can't make miracles – when voters don't trust politicians or don't see the true reason they will stay at home anyhow. Poland dramatically needs the revival of the political life and maybe even of the political elites. We hope that civic education can do it – if not for the present generation in power, it can change political culture of those who are now at school.

### 4. DIVERSITY & GENDER

CCE programs are built on the premise that diversity is a source of value, though sometimes can be also a source of problems, which have to be resolved in a peaceful way. Poland is a highly homogenous nation – we are almost all whites, Roman Catholics, born here or close to here. National, religious and cultural minorities have just begun to rebuild their identities. In our textbooks and projects (e.g. *Traces of the past*) we are trying to enhance understanding of this process and counter the stereotypes connected with different "others" – Jews, Germans, Ukrainians. We understand diversity in a broad sense – as diversity not only of cultures or national identities but of different perspectives and backgrounds. This definition is more adequate to Polish situation and makes more people involved in building society open to the "others".

In our work we don't tackle the gender mainstreaming directly – so far it has not been on our list of top priorities. We are planning to pay more attention to it in the future...

### 5. CONCLUSIONS/DESIDERATA

- *Disciplina in civitatem* – civic education is crucial, but not easy, especially in post-communist countries
- Voter participation can be enhanced, but unfortunately only to a certain extent
- The quality of the political life is – at least in Poland - a prerequisite for greater interest in election
- Other conclusions – at the workshop!!!