

NETWORKING EUROPEAN CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION

Citizenship Education Facing Nationalism and Populism in Europe

Strategies - Competencies – Practices

Interview

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NECE: Nationalist movements in politics and media - is Europe drifting backwards? Or is this a future model?

We might be entering a post nationalistic world where we should not be surprised to see nationalism both rise and fade away. It will rise because people need to reaffirm their identity in a globalised and very crowded world. Parties and media will respond to this demand by maintaining patriotic phraseology and producing nationalistic slogans. International alliances, such as the European Union will encourage policies of cultural, ethnic and national diversity as well as decentralisation of government. There might be more schools teaching Welsh and we might see revival of forgotten national traditions. However this will all happen in the form of festive policies that will compensate the decline of national sovereignty in a very interdependent world.

At the same time nationalism is fading away because nations are disappearing in the form we know them from the history textbooks. How could we talk seriously about nations when Skype has more than 300 million subscribers? How can nationalism survive in a world that could suddenly be gripped by a global financial economic crisis, which can only be addressed globally? How can you differentiate between Spanish and South African CO₂? You can't. In a world that is rapidly recognising climate change as one of its main economic, environmental, political and even security problems talking about nationalism is like talking about steam engines – they are still around, we still learn about them in school, but nobody will use one to get to work.

Nationalism in Europe, and around the world, is turning into a cheap populist device. We should help it die more quickly and painlessly. Like a very old horse with a broken leg.

Nationalist enthusiasm however will reappear from time to time as an indicator of a political vacuum. When the mainstream political parties lose public confidence, nationalists quickly fill the gap. In the French presidential elections of 2002, Jean-Marie Le Pen obtained 17% in the first round and made it through to the second round. The simple reason was not the rise of nationalism but the decline of confidence of French citizens in mainstream politicians. When the stage was taken by a passionate battle between Nicolas Sarkozy and Ségolène Royal and even joined by a third player, François Bayrou, Le Pen came fourth. The recent success of the two main nationalist parties in Austria could be explained better by the weakness of the two coalition government parties rather than some sudden raise of Austrian nationalism. The success of the Bulgarian Ataka is also very much a result of poor

performance of the mainstream parties. Last year the Scottish National Party won the Scottish elections. One main reason for their success was the very low point of their only serious opponent in Scotland – the Labour Party.

This trend however should not be described as drifting backwards. It is just that when you abandon your house, squatters can move in.

NECE: How would you evaluate the developments in West and Eastern Europe on these issues?

We should worry not so much about nationalism as about the lack of engaging political ideas and the inability of many politicians to inspire the voters and win the confidence of voters.

We should also worry about the inability of the international community to act decisively and prevent conflicts. The wars in the Balkans could have been prevented or at least their tragic impact greatly reduced by a firm and swift international action. The hesitation and bureaucratic diplomacy of UN and to a large extent, the EU, can cost many lives and prolong suffering of whole nations.

The inability of Europe to create a clear position on some of the most important issues of our time is a serious cause for concern. Europe seems to be unable to reach a convincing common position on issues like energy, Russia or agriculture. On one hand people feel that more and more power is shifted towards Brussels. On the other hand they cannot hear a clear voice from there addressing their concerns. It is not surprising that people do not trust the EU when it comes to national security issues for instance. That is one of the reasons why most East European countries turned their back on the strong French and German position against the invasion of Iraq and supported the US.

Climate change is one of the cases where Europe is leading. Nevertheless, while Western Europe is politically advanced in discussing climate change and negotiating radical mitigation targets, Eastern Europe is lagging badly behind in this field. This gap is opening up a new field for nationalistic feelings to be played out. Carbon nationalism was recently demonstrated by the Warsaw declaration by the five new member countries opposing the EU climate and energy package. There is plenty of mild nationalistic phraseology in this declaration, including the idea of a threat to national security, and it is just one more example of how lack of national political vision breeds populist and nationalistic trends.

NECE: How should citizenship education and civil society react to these phenomena?

European enlargement did not address one major issue – education. In most new member states education standards have declined, in some countries (Bulgaria and Romania) dramatically. I believe that first of all governments and civil society should address the issue of general quality of education. That includes both high academic standards and proper access to good education for all. It sounds simple but achieving such goal is depressingly difficult.

Second, I think that citizenship education should be participative and not instructive education. Taking a class to a police station is much better approach than lecturing about public institutions.

Children and young people should be involved actively in charity work, they should simply spend time helping others. Others in their communities and others abroad. Governments and NGOs should help all educational institutions in their charity work. Governments should spend substantial amounts of money to support the small voluntary sector and the involvement of educational institutions in it, rather than introduce more instructive classes of citizenship.

There is a role for traditional learning as well. In addition to raising overall educational standards, we should make an effort to learn history. Proper history. Not history of the EU but history of Europe and the world. We should also learn history from other nations' point of view. France should try to learn the English history of France and England should try to learn the French history of England. This approach is particularly relevant to the Balkans where each event is presented in many different and completely contradicting history lessons. We should learn about ourselves through the eyes of the others. And we should learn to respect scholarship, academic scepticism and the right to revisit history. Recent public and politicians reaction to a modest academic paper about an episode in Bulgarian history (the Batak massacre) just showed how far we are from such attitude.

The roots of nationalism are usually fed by historical ignorance. Here the mass media should also play its role. That role might be painful, controversial but the media, especially the national media, has the duty to present academically sound history lessons and combat the childish ignorance of the nationalistic misinterpretations of history.