Citizenship Education in Times of Crisis

Educación para la ciudadanía en tiempos de crisis

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Abstract: The European Union (EU) faces a deep crisis. Under the impression of economic troubles, wars in and around Europe (Ukraine, Syria) and an unprecedented immigration of refugees, political leaders try to muddle through the difficult times, while political extremists and anti-European forces suggest alleged solutions and divide the Union. In view of the crisis, citizenship education is often neglected, although it is a crucial measure for long-term stability, European integration and wealth. The education of young generations needs to be considered as a core challenge for the EU. It should provide political knowledge of history, institutions, actors and procedures of democracy in the nation states and the EU, democratic values and behaviour, skills to participate in a communicational public sphere. It should enable citizens to understand how democratic politics functions, what the core values of democracy are, how interests can be articulated and promoted in a European multi-level system and how political claims or projects can gain broader attention.

Keywords: citizenship education; Europe; European Union; democracy; politic.

Resumen: La Unión Europea (UE) se enfrenta a una profunda crisis. Bajo la presión de los problemas económicos, las guerras en los territorios transfronterizos de Europa (Ucrania, Siria, etc.) y la migración sin precedentes de refugiados, los líderes políticos europeos tratan de salir adelante en estos tiempos difíciles, mientras los extremistas políticos y los anti-europeístas proponen supuestas *soluciones*, incluso dividir la Unión. Desde esta perspectiva de crisis, a menudo, se descuidan aspectos esenciales como la educación para la ciudadanía, aunque ésta sea una de las medidas esenciales para la estabilidad del proyecto a largo plazo, la integración europea y la riqueza en todos los sentidos. La educación de las jóvenes generaciones necesita ser considerada como un desafío esencial para la UE, ya que debería proveerles del conocimiento político de la historia, de las instituciones, de los actores implicados y de los procedimientos de la democracia en los estados-nación y, particularmente, de la UE, sus valores democráticos, el comportamiento como ciudadanos y la capacidad de participar y comunicar en la esfera pública. Se debe habilitar a los ciudadanos para comprender cómo funciona la política democrática, lo que son y significan el núcleo de los valores democráticos, cómo los diferentes intereses pueden ser articulados y promovidos en un sistema de multiniveles europeo, y cómo las propuestas y proyectos promovidos pueden generar una mayor atención.

Palabras clave: educación para la ciudadanía; Europa; Unión Europea; democracia; política.

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Europe is in times of a deep and multiple crises. The financial and debt problems of 2008 caused an ongoing malaise of the common currency, austerity-programs, high unemployment rates and a pessimistic economic outlook. In 2014, the conflict between Ukraine and Russia led to a crisis at the borders of the EU with consequences for foreign affairs, energy-policy and EU-Russia relations. Finally, the wars in the Middle East that followed the Arab Spring movement in 2011 brought about a refugee crisis and shed light on deep differences between member states about the question how to deal with this unexpected immigration. Moreover, the terrorist attacks in January and November 2015 in Paris fostered an already existing general atmosphere of fear and anger on the continent. In such difficult times, people expect solutions from the political elites and get attracted by populists who seem to have the clue for finding easy ways out of the impasses. Anti-European extremists and right-wing Eurosceptics are on the forerun in many EU countries. The French National Front of Marine Le Pen takes a leading role among the Eurosceptic right and works closely together with parties of other states, like the Austrian FPOe, the True Finns, Italian Lega Nord etc. They suggest new fences, walls and borders between EU states, question the Schengen agreements and promote the renationalization of the EU. Their supporters are mainly young, male, often unemployed and without perspectives in their domestic societies. In general, they lack formal education and have a low level of what is called employability. Since they expect nothing from the ruling elites, they have little to loose and therefore set their hopes in populists and extremists from different sides. It was well shown in different studies, that from a socio-demographic point of view, the pool where ISIS and right extremists are fishing for followers is very much the same. The young persons attracted by such groups can also be subsumed under the term «losers of globalization».

In such circumstances, citizenship education is of highest relevance to avoid a backfall into nationalism, protectionism and xenophobia as it was the case in the inter-war period of the 20th century. Although such education cannot bring about fast and easy solutions and can therefore not replace a rational and clear-minded political crisis management, it is crucial for a democratic and European identity of our future generations.

1. Deficits in European democracies

In general, our European democracies suffer from several deficits. First, there is a deficit of trust in institutions and representatives of representative democracy among the European citizens (Hix, 2003). As a consequence, voters' turnout and general participation in democratic life decline and anti-European and anti-democratic movements get stronger (De Waele *et al.*, 2015). This bears the risk

of renationalization, a dissolution of the EU and the emergence of very exclusive forms of democracy

1.1. *Trust in institutions*

As one can see from Eurobarometer and other surveys, the levels of mistrust are relatively high in most EU countries, but at the same time there are remarkable differences between the states (Pausch, 2014). Mainly countries from Central and Eastern Europe have extremely low levels of institutional trust which makes these young democracies especially unstable and vulnerable. But also old democracies such as France or the United Kingdom show rising mistrust towards the problem solving capacities of their politicians and institutions. The reasons for this development are manifold. Since the 1980s, traditional voting behaviour in Western Europe was more and more replaced by abstentionism and a decline in traditional party membership. The value change and social individualization as described by Ronald Inglehart (1997) or Ulrich Beck (1986) and later by Robert Putnam (1995) and others led to a more individualized society where social and family bindings and ties were put into question. People had more opportunities, more options out of which they could choose different life styles, different professional biographies and different political parties. Identities and belongings that had been clearly predefined over decades from birth to death could now be changed and re-changed. Religious truths and morality were questioned by new approaches and by scepticism towards traditional values in general. The new liberties had to be paid with a loss of security. Those, who were better educated had more chances to benefit from the new options than those who had less perspectives and little education (Genov, 2014). Society split up in winners and losers of this – sometimes described as post-modern – new world. The latter, however, lacked behind and had to face the risks more than the options of individualization.

In the 1990s, the value change and the social individualization were followed by deep political changes mainly in Central and Eastern Europe, but also in the Western world. After the fall of the Soviet Union, globalization and neo-liberalism in world economics multiplied the options for the winners but also the risks for the losers. Political parties in nation states could not deliver security anymore or minimise the risks (Fredriksen, 2012). Middle-class started to decline as a few climbed the social ladder but much more descended or at least got into precarious and unstable situations. Trust in the capacity of democratic institutions to improve life declined tremendously. The latest crisis only is the peak of this long-term development that can be observed since more than two decades now. Even worse than the image of national democracies is the image of the

European Union and its institutions. This has to do with the well-known tactics of national governments to blame the EU for unpopular measures, but also with the low level of information and knowledge about the history, the structures and the procedures of the EU.

1.2. *Decline in political participation*

When more and more people distrust the political institutions, the consequence is a decline in political participation. This decline goes hand in hand with the decline of trust and can be shown for many European countries. Pascal Perrineau distinguishes two groups of abstentionists. Those, who have lost contact to politics because of their social milieu. They experience politics as something that has nothing to do with themselves or their life. They neither feel that they had any serious chance to influence decisions of the elites, nor that their daily problems would find any attention or consideration in political decision making. Politics is – in their view – a thing for those who belong to an upper class (Perrineau, 2007, p. 17). The second group of abstentionists is the larger one and consists of people who see themselves as protesters vis-à-vis the political system. This group includes different social groups who blame politicians for being corrupt, elitist and egoist. While the first group has no or little political interest, the second one is interested in general, but disillusioned. However, they can be mobilised for other ways of democratic participation and expression such as demonstrations, petitions etc. Their protest can be absorbed by different political movements or parties, extremists from the right as well as leftists, green parties, etc.

1.3. *Rise of anti-Europeanism and anti-democratic movements*

The described circumstances are very favourable for the emergence and rise of populist politicians and parties who do not need to govern but can limit their populism to critique towards the ruling groups. Populists usually follow the strategy to blame some clear defined groups for everything that is considered to be problematic in society, economy and politics. For right-wing populists, the situation is especially promising in times of supra- and inter-nationalization or globalization. Since they traditionally focus on aspects like home- or fatherland, religion, common culture and language, national identity and ethnic homogeneity, the current developments can easily be linked to their easy explanations (Taggart, 2003). Everything that is against the mentioned principles and values is blamed to be evil. In their view, the EU threatens «fatherlands» and national sovereignty, immigration threatens common culture, language and ethnic homogeneity. They

argue that international economic networks rule the world for the benefit of some small elitist groups. These explanations have their origins in fascism and National Socialism and are often used today by right-wing populists and extremists in many European countries – the Front National in France, the Austrian Freedom Party, the German Alternative for Germany, the Hungarian FIDESZ party, the True Finns, the Sweden Democrats, the Italian Lega Nord, the United Kingdom Independence Party, etc.

In some countries (Hungary, Finland, Greece, Poland) right-wing populists are already in coalition governments. In others (Austria, France, Belgium), they are strong opposition parties with good chances in the next elections and in almost all countries they are on the rise. In combination with an ever stronger feeling of fear and insecurity caused by terrorism and often – at least in the political debates – linked to immigration, anti-European and anti-democratic positions seem to spread over Europe. The question, where this could lead us to is difficult to answer, but it seems clear that our democracies if not dissolved would definitely be transformed into more exclusive political systems.

2. Citizenship as a long-term remedy

The described deficits and problems of today's democracies on the national and the European level cannot be overcome with fast and easy remedies. They need on the one hand strong and pronounced answers from those who still believe in the democratic and European values among which are freedom, solidarity, transparency and openness. These values need to be defended by fighting inequality, creating equal chances and by structural reforms (Pausch, 2014). Moreover, they need decisions from politicians to strengthen citizenship education at all levels of age and social classes. Citizenship education, understood as democratic education with the aim to strengthen tolerance, openness, participation and democracy in general, needs to start in primary school go the whole way up to institutions of adult education, to firms and enterprises as well as organisations of the civil society (Diestro Fernández, 2014). In terms of content, citizenship education bases on three pillars which are

- political knowledge of history, institutions, actors and procedures of democracy,
- democratic values and behaviour,
- skills to participate in a communicational public sphere.

Political knowledge is a necessary precondition for practical participation. Somebody who does not know where, on which levels (local, regional, national or supranational), by which actors (ministries, administrations) and by which

procedures decisions are made, cannot use his/her political rights. But before concrete skills are concerned, citizenship education is about democracy in general, its values and its historical development. Therefore, philosophical and ethical questions need to be addressed. What is liberty, what solidarity? What are basic human rights and which rights are related to citizenship of a nation state? What are political parties, how did they emerge and what should one expect from them? A further goal of citizenship education is the fostering of political competences in order to take informed and rational decisions in elections, but it is of crucial importance to stress that citizenship education goes further than this. It should enable citizens to understand how politics functions, how interests can be promoted and how political claims or projects can gain broader attention. Basic information about actors in the political game, interests of stakeholders and resources of power need to be taught to citizens so that they cannot only make a rational and realistic choice in elections, but also an evaluation of chances to influence, of obstacles to overcome and of networks to build in order to bring through own or group interests, especially of those who usually are under-represented and disadvantaged in the political game. Citizenship education should give at hands the knowledge about ways of mobilization and the basics of strategic thinking. Who is concerned? Who could give support? With whom could I build a network or a coalition of interest? How can I reach a broader public for my own stake etc.? Especially in times when unconventional political participation is more and more replacing conventional forms of participation, the teaching of project realization is of high importance. Finally, skills in argumentation, critical and alternative thinking, critical reflection and self-reflection, deliberation and communication should be included, but with a focus on fair and equal communication, not in a way as suggested by modern new linguistic programmes that are more interested in manipulation than in deliberation. All this should not be reduced to the national levels. Information and education must undoubtedly take into account the European dimension, since national democracy in Europe is not understandable without the history of the EU. Thus, what was suggested for the domestic level needs to be widened to Europe: EU history, structures and procedures should be known by any European citizen. Citizenship education that is limited to the national democracy is not sufficient and cannot fulfil the claim of broad political understanding. It would undoubtedly lead to mistrust towards European institutions and widen the gap between the EU and its citizens. For that a peaceful continent of European cooperation has a chance to overcome times of crises and to survive the next centuries, European citizenship education needs to go the whole way through.

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