NECE WORKSHOP

"Fragility and Resilience of Democracies in Europe. Where now for Citizenship Education and Civil Societies?"
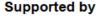
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Report by Marinko Banjac, University of Ljubljana

"The assertion that what goes under the heading of "illiberal democracy" is simply hostility to democracy itself is too simplistic. Indeed, we need to better clarify the different meanings of "democracy" precisely so that we can better appreciate the strengths and limits of the liberal democracy that is worthy of our intellectual and political support".

Jeffrey C. Isaac[1]

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[1] Isaac, Jeffrey C. 2017. Is There Illiberal Democracy? A Problem with no Semantic Solution. Available at: http://www.publicseminar.org/2017/07/is-there-illiberal-democracy/#.WhLtj1Xiapo (20.11.2017).

Introduction

This statement of Jeffrey C. Isaac takes us to the very centre of current political processes not only in Europe but also on a global level. We are in the middle of a critical juncture in which governing systems and governmental practices in (liberal) democracies are reformulated and redefined in a way we predominantly perceive as undemocratic. At the same time, we often operate with concepts such as democracy, liberalism, rights, freedoms and illiberalism too easily and in an unthinking, taken-for-granted manner. Discussing, reflecting and rethinking the concepts we use and the situation in which we are, especially in Europe, is therefore a necessary first step to understand the political context which is shaping our work in citizenship education.

The NECE Workshop "Fragility and Resilience of Democracies in Europe: Where now for Citizenship Education and Civil Societies?" was a succinct response to such calls. In cooperation with the European Solidarity Centre in Gdansk (Poland), it aimed to address, discuss and reflect on the causes and impacts of the current crises of democracies, in particular the trend towards illiberal democracies in the eastern member states of the EU.

The introductory session started with welcoming words from Jacek Kołtan, the Deputy Director of the European Solidarity Centre. Christoph Müller-Hofstede from the Federal Agency for Civic Education presented NECE as an expanding platform for citizenship education and civil society in Europe and neighbouring countries. The Gdansk workshop's main aim was to prepare the political and intellectual agenda for the next NECE conference in Marseille in September 2018 – a decisive time with Brexit and the European elections in 2019 less than a year away. Caroline Hornstein-Tomic, Head of the Operative Division of the Federal Agency for Civic Education (Germany) pointed out that while undemocratic populism and tendencies are pressing in some East-European countries, they are far from limited to Eastern Europe – as the German 'Alternative for Germany' has secured more than 90 seats in the new German Bundestag.

'…fear itself? How to deal with the spectre of populism in European democracies?'

Ivan Krastev's (Centre for Liberal Strategies, Bulgaria) keynote (taking a clue from the famous Roosevelt quote: 'We have nothing to fear but fear itself') discussed the changing political landscape in Europe after multiple crises have hit the continent since 2008 and in particular in 2015/16.

Drawing on his latest book 'After Europe', Krastev argued that we can no longer take the European Union for granted. A particular event contributing to this was certainly Brexit. The decision of the British people to leave the European Union changed the question from "who is joining the EU next" to "who is the next to leave the EU". The EU project with all its advantages and drawbacks was regarded for a long time as a framework for strong political cooperation among European countries and viewed as inherently positive. It was viewed as inviting 'family' respecting principles of liberty, democracy, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and the rule of law. As such, the EU became regarded as a 'special club' that many non-EU countries aspired to became members of. In the wake of the financial and immigration crisis, popular dissatisfaction with the integration process increased, leading to new rifts among member states. Mr Krastev underlined the importance of the immigration

crisis which in his view was the force majeure in transforming the political landscape within the EU. It was one of the major reasons why voters in many countries moved from the centre left to the far right.

Furthermore, the open borders created by the European Union have contributed to paradoxical developments. The beneficiaries of open borders turned out to be, in his words, 'brilliant individual emigrants (up to 2,1 Million alone in Bulgaria), bad eastern European politicians, and xenophobic western European parties.'

Mr Krastev also addressed the concept of populism. One of the problems, he said, is that it is very vaguely defined. However, the concept indicates the decline of the attractiveness of liberal solutions in the fields of politics, economy, and culture, and the growing popularity of the politics of exclusion. The latter is also emerging via democratic electoral systems. According to Krastev, the new 'threatened majorities' perceive elections not as an opportunity to choose between policy options but as a revolt against privileged minorities – in the case of Europe, elites and a key collective "other," the migrants. In the rhetoric of populist parties, elites and migrants are twins who thrive of one another: neither is like "us," both steal and rob from the honest majority, neither pays the taxes that it should pay, and both are indifferent or hostile to local traditions.

Taking a closer look: reflections on the cases of Poland and Hungary as illiberal democracies

One of the European countries in which the rise of right-wing populism defines, structures and upholds the policies and activities of the government is Poland. As many authors suggest, Poland is one of the examples of illiberal democracies where certain rights and freedoms of the people are slipping away. At the NECE workshop, the case of Poland as an illiberal democracy was addressed by a roundtable with inputs by Marek Cichocki from Collegium Civitas Warsaw (Poland), Jan Sowa, social theorist and author (Poland) and Karolina Wigura from Kultura Liberalna (Poland).

Mr Cichocki expressed his scepticism about the indiscriminate use of concepts of populism as linked to authoritarianism, especially in the sense of their ability to explain the changing political landscape in Eastern Europe and the 'old' member states of the EU alike. His critique included the neoliberal paradigm which shaped the transformation of the former communist countries. Neoliberalism did not only produce economic and social inequalities but also neglected (cultural) identities and traditional values. It went along – as he stated in his paper – with the 'transformation of liberalism into the political ideology of corroded postmodernity' which made it 'reactionary and blind, disabling any attempts to understand the post-transformation changes in the CE as the inherent part of the broader evolution (..) of the post-cold war West.' According to Mr Cichocki, the solution lies in the redefinition of liberalism. The latter needs to find a way to include and acknowledge more traditional values and 'strong' identities if it wants to abandon its defensive position.

Mr Sowa's contribution started with the observation that Poland is prevailingly regarded as an economic miracle and one of the best performing states in the EU. However, this discourse hides the fact that there is a widening gap between rich and poor. Additionally, working conditions are becoming more and more precarious. As a possible solution Mr Sowa sees

new strong redistributive politics – which in fact have been one of the reasons why the current government is enjoying undiminished support, despite its illiberal policies. In his paper, drawing on basic findings of thinkers such as Karl Polanyi (The Great Transformation), he argued that 'the root causes of populism stem from profound dysfunctions in three spheres: economic, social and political.

Generally, the dysfunctional transformation of post-communist and western societies over the last decades can be seen as the major cause of the ‚populist uprisings' in recent years. Democracy – as we know it – needs to develop in a more inclusive and thus more representative political system if we want to stop populism turning towards dangerous authoritarian solutions.

Karolina Wigura challenged the macro-perspective of her colleagues at the panel. She explained that if we want to grasp the current situation in Poland, we should start with the analysis of micro-processes. Ms Wigura gave some specific reasons for the success of the Polish right-wing Law and Justice Party, among which special attention must be paid to new divisions in Western societies, the crisis of the liberal democratic state model, the crisis of liberal ideology and elites and, finally, the end of the post-communist myth of the West. Another reason for the success of right-wing populism in Poland that must be acknowledged is the opposition's 'contribution' to furthering the divide of the Polish society. The opposition identifies those who are currently in power and those who support them as 'the other side' and consequently builds further divisions and antagonisms within the population.

Like Poland, another East European country – Hungary – is sliding into what is called and diagnosed as illiberal democracy. Since coming to power, Viktor Orban and his government have cracked down on the media and non-governmental organisations that are identified as potential or real enemies of the state. All this can be regarded as a shift away from Hungary as a liberal democracy.

The contributors to the roundtable on Hungary were Edit Inotai from the Centre for Euro-Atlantic Integration and Democracy (Hungary) and Marc Soignet from the European Humanist Federation (Belgium). Both speakers agreed that Hungary is indeed in a very critical situation in which the government is heavily transforming the political and social landscape of Hungarian society. Ms Inotai pointed out, that at the same time some of the reforms implemented by Orban are working and are successful, which is at least partly a reason why Orban's government has such a strong support. On the other hand, as Ms Inotai observed, there are some alarming features of his rule. Corruption, disappearance of public debates and instrumentalisation of fear are only some of the detected threats to democracy in Hungary. Consequently, one of the persistent issues of the last few years is that populists set the agenda while the opposition does not have a programme of its own. In the face of obvious threats to democracy and the above mentioned persistent issue, there is a need for citizenship education to recognize problems and find a way to stop the populist propaganda. Equally, the media need to find a way to maintain their plurality and independence from the government since this is one of the key aspects of a functioning and 'healthy' democracy. Another responsibility of the media in face of the growing populism is to challenge extremist discourses by presenting facts and objective evidences. As Mr Inotai claims, the news race

can only be won with authentic stories – which will weaken the populists' position of blaming the media for partisanship and one-sided reporting.

In the process of looking for responses to increasing undemocratic pressures, it is relevant as well to reflect further why Orban managed to install various undemocratic measures and why the policies he has implemented are successful. Mr Soignet presented three dimensions of Orban's success. Firstly, during the rule of Orban, we can observe cosmetic checks and balances. While it only seems that policies are democratically conceived and implemented, there is no real public debate on them. Secondly, all the reforms under Orban's rule are connected which makes them complex and hard to challenge. Thirdly, in Hungary, there is persistent and ongoing campaign against what government addresses as enemies of the state. The latter are immigrants, civil society organisations, etc.

The big picture: Democracies and their crises in a comparative perspective

Both cases of Poland and Hungary reveal big restructurings of democratic systems and values, while also inciting increasing social tensions within societies. The cases of Poland and Hungary could be considered as the most acute examples, but far-right discourses and populism building on fear and exclusions can be observed in many other European countries. Can we, therefore, speak of democracy in crisis? It was precisely this question that was addressed and reflected by Wolfgang Merkel from Berlin Social Science Centre (Germany). One of his first points was that thinking of a crisis of democracy is far from straightforward and not an easy task, especially because crises have always been present throughout the history of democracy.

Mr Merkel presented a set of statistics and indices that show that there is no general crisis of democracy – as shown in his presentation here. It can be argued, as some studies show, that there is no visible downtrend in terms of quality of democracy in most of the European countries because people still highly regard most of the democratic institutions in our societies. At the same time, there are serious new challenges for democracies, such as increasing levels of exclusion of socially deprivileged parts of population and a loss of democratic sovereignty in policy making.

In the discussion that followed, the focus was turned towards the possibility of building inclusive democratic societies where equality among citizens is not just formally ensured but truly implemented. Here, the question is to what extent citizenship education and civil society can influence the political agendas at national and European levels. Whereas they can make decision-makers and political elites more aware of the societal issues and put them under certain pressure, their ability to change the course of (economic) globalization and the increasing socioeconomic and political inequality of our societies is (still) questionable. However, educators and civil society need to counter existing exclusions and inequalities if we are to avoid further radicalizations and extremisms in Europe.

Recommendation and ideas for projects: Citizenship education in action

Based on these inputs, the participants divided into working groups that addressed and reflected topics which were defined by the participants themselves. The aim was to put together a list of recommendations, good practices and ideas for projects that may enhance

democratic resilience and innovative practices on the local, national and transnational level. The groups addressed four different relevant themes.

The first group addressed a question of how to stimulate civic engagement in local contexts distant from urban environments. While democratic systems nominally ensure the right of participation for everybody, distant and marginalised communities are still lacking substantial possibilities to participate in the political processes affecting their daily lives. The group took a very practical view and conceived a three-step process through which marginalised communities could raise their voice, speak and act.

The second group addressed the ever-persistent issue of basic social and political identity formation through binaries of Us and Them. While the issue is well known and solutions to transcend it are many, it is still worthy to reflect on it, especially within the framework of citizenship education. What was particularly valuable was the group's focus on the necessary element of self-reflection of everybody who works within citizenship education. The transcending of binary divides and exclusions starts at ourselves and therefore we need to understand our intimate environments to resolve successfully possible conflicts.

The third group focused on the topic of addressing a variety of political and societal issues within the framework of citizenship education. Among the recommendations produced by this group was the call to start a learning process about emotions within citizenship education and politics to be able to respond to the issue of addressing fears and anxieties emerging in democratic societies. It was strongly recommended to follow up on this topic in the Marseille conference along the existing and ongoing research by Karolina Wigura. Another relevant idea of the group was that citizenship education needs to recognize the "art of disagreement". The idea behind is the recognition that differences and different opinions will always be present in our societies. Therefore, the question is how to discuss and accept the differences which means that the process of disagreement itself is more important than the result.

The fourth group addressed the concept of illiberal democracy at the theoretical level, especially in juxtaposition with the so-called healthy democracy or liberal democracy. The starting point of the discussion was the performative function of the signifier of illiberal democracy in a sense that its usage constructs some political systems as negative and simultaneously the others as positive. Thus, liberal democracies are portrayed as inherently positive and taken as ideal. The group discussed various definitions of (il)liberal democracy pointing out some problems and paradoxes that appear when using them. Additionally, various power arrangements and governmental mechanisms and practices in both illiberal and liberal democracies were addressed and discussed. As a recommendation for citizenship education, the group proposed that different concepts (such as (il)liberal democracy) should not be used without critical reflection but rather continuously analysed and critically reflected.

Conclusions

The NECE workshop concluded with a review of the work done and take – always in terms of insights and project ideas. Christoph Müller-Hofstede pointed out that the next NECE

conference to be held in Marseille (France) in September 2018 will offer an excellent opportunity to continue the discussion which was started in Gdansk,

As a general idea it should reflect on the state of democracy in Europe (and the world), the new risks and opportunities for citizenship education and function as a laboratory for practitioners and scholars alike. As in Gdansk, blending an intellectual high-level discussion with an exchange on effective responses by citizenship educators and civil society will shape the Marseille conference.

One of the workshop's important messages is that simply observing political realignments in Europe and taking a 'moral high ground' when condemning resentments fuelled by the far-right is not enough. (European) citizenship education must first and foremost recognise the complexity of situations we live in. It is worth noting that democracy is not a simple concept nor a straightforward practice. Instead, it is an elusive and pluralist concept and, most importantly, it is a framework that demands continuous efforts to build communities in which people can live and work based on equality and solidarity with one another.

Ljubljana, 21.11.2017