

Citizenship Education Facing Nationalism and Populism in Europe

Strategies - Competencies – Practices

Opening Remarks

Thomas Krüger

President of the German Federal Agency for Civic Education

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Dear President Pirinski, dear Speakers and Moderators, Ladies and Gentlemen,

it is both an honour and a pleasure to be able to welcome you here in Sofia. I would like to thank all of you for coming, both in the name of the German Federal Agency for Civic Education and in the name of the many partners that helped make this conference possible. Let me name but a few: the Goethe-Institute in Sofia and its director Rudolf Bartsch provided extensive support here, opening many doors in the city – in particular by helping us to explore Sofia’s urban history this afternoon.

Special thanks go to Vessela Tcherneva and Ivan Krastev from the Center for Liberal Strategies who immediately supported the idea of the conference when we met in Sofia a year ago. The Center was also an invaluable partner in yesterday’s experts’ workshop on media populism which was organised with the help of the Allianz Cultural Foundation and Michael Thoss, its managing director.

Prof. Ivaylo Ditschev, Prof. Christo Todorov, Professor Alexander Kiossev, Prof. Rayna Gavrilova and other experts from Bulgaria and the region discussed the intellectual design of the conference with us and will contribute to the workshops and discussions here. We hope to work with you in expanding the NECE- platform in the coming years.

The German Foundation ‘*Remembrance, Responsibility and Future*’ (Stiftung Erinnerung, Verantwortung und Zukunft) is an active partner of the NECE Network and helped us very generously in raising the budget for our conference. For many years, the *Austrian Federal Ministry for Education, the Arts and Culture* has been part of our European Network for Civic Education. I would like to take this

opportunity to thank Sigrid Steininger and Dr. Wirtisch for their financial and intellectual support for this meeting.

Last but not least allow me to welcome the young scholarship holders from Bulgaria, Poland, Rumania, Slovakia, the Czech Republic and Hungary who have come to Sofia as part of a joint programme run by the Robert Bosch Foundation and the German Federal Agency for Civic Education. Our aim with this programme is to help build up civic education networks in Europe, in particular between Western and Eastern Europe, and to provide the initiative for cross-border co-operations. I would be delighted to see this conference, too, operating as a forum of ideas for this and other programmes.

Dear ladies and gentlemen, we have an ambitious agenda at this conference, our keynote speaker Ivan Krastev is about to lead us into our topic so I will restrict myself to three brief remarks here.

Firstly, I would like to draw a link between the most fascinating event of recent days – the election of Barack Obama the day before yesterday to the summit of world power, the United States – and the topic of our conference. Barack Hussein Obama, with his roots in Africa, Indonesia and Hawaii, is a product of centuries of perpetual large-scale migrations. His election announces an epochal change in the self-perception of American society, a society which – may I recall – was still shaken by civil-warlike unrest within the context of the racial question 40 years ago. Large-scale migrations are going to impose profound changes on European societies too in the 21st century. Obama’s election – so it appears to me – anticipates our future here in Europe. Rotterdam elected the Muslim Dutch Moroccan politician Ahmed Aboutaleb as its mayor just a few days ago – and this was in a society which has produced populist and islamophobic currents and movements over and over again in the last few years. Should we not be preparing ourselves right now for a European Union that, sooner or later, is going to have a Muslim Commission President?

To state it briefly: the demographic and cultural change, with all the individual and collective fears, the questions of identity that it triggers, will be the issue of the future in our work as civic educators. And these are not straightforward questions that can be answered with political correctness. A national context is simply no longer sufficient for debating and solving these problems. One goal of this European conference of civic educators, therefore, is to look for new ideas and methods which can be used to take up these topics in schools and in the civic public sphere. How can we find new mechanisms to deal with identity?

Secondly: the catchword “populism” is immediately associated with the well-known developments in Eastern and Southern Europe since the European Union was expanded. Indeed, the outcome is ambivalent. Whereas, for many, Europe is and will remain a winning project, in Eastern and Southern Europe populist and nationalistic slogans are widely bandied about. If we go by the analysis of Ivan Krastev, we now find ourselves at the end of the liberal era that began in 1989. His summary of the situation is depressing indeed: According to the global Voice of the People survey 2006, Central Europe is now the region of the world where citizens are most sceptical about democracy. The new reality in Central Europe is polarisation and populism. However, things do not always look better in the core countries of the European Union: the failed referendums for Maastricht and Lisbon proved the extent of

Euroscepticism and the seductive force of populist slogans. Far-right and populist parties are now an established component of the multi-party democracy system; their election successes, as was recently the case in Austria, give rise to concern. This leads to two interim conclusions: firstly, we are dealing with a pan-European phenomenon which – many people assume – is probably going to be boosted by the effects of the financial and economic crisis. Therefore, let us prepare ourselves for a rise in xenophobic and anti-migration slogans, for a growing popularity of the politics of exclusion – to quote Krastev again. (A corresponding warning can be deduced from a recent internal document at the British Home Office, reports the Economist). And secondly, despite all the differences: populism is always based on the conscious attempt to simplify problems. Therein – says Ralf Dahrendorf – lies its attraction and formula for success. Democratic civic education, however, has precisely the opposite intention – namely, to help citizens to learn to live with complexity. How can civic education be made popular in the face of the anti-liberal and emotional appeals of populism, how can complex interrelations be made comprehensible? In this context, too, it is the aim of the conference to develop new arguments and instruments that can be called up and developed further on a Europe-wide platform.

Thirdly, populist appeals stand in close association with the second central term of our conference: nationalism. Even before Saskia Sassen we knew that globalisation not only brings us denationalisation processes, but also renationalisation in the field of social belonging, identity, culture, history. How can we deal with this paradox of the national appropriately in civic education? Are the nationalistic tales of the rise and sacrifice of the nations really only fairytales for the children that we are not going to have tomorrow, as the Polish journalist Adam Krzeminski recently remarked. Or are we not dealing with a force that continues to be enormously creative, whose storytelling mechanism – says Alexander Kiossev – we criticise, but also need to understand! The image of an enlightened Western post-nationalist EU Europe obliged to fight a running battle with a residual nationalist Eastern and Southern Europe is still deeply established in the minds of civic educators. The central question is: how much national feeling and which kind of it can we allow ourselves without risking major conflicts within the Union? And, on an entirely practical level: how can we establish multiple perspectives in school textbooks and in public debates, in the media?

I await your proposals eagerly and would be delighted if we could close our conference on Saturday with a confident ‘Yes, we Can’. Thank you for your attention!