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Turning back the tide, but how? Citizenship Education for a citizens' Europe

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An experience from Hungary

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We are living in a rapidly changing world. Citizens have to reinvent themselves several times within a generation, skills need to be updated and re-evaluated constantly. We suffer under an information overload, and due to the weakening of the traditional media, one of the biggest challenges is to separate valid, authentic stories from propaganda and fake news. Confidence in fundamental values, like democracy, solidarity, human rights, equality, is shaken. In the atmosphere of insecurity, hardline politicians gain power and promise easy solutions to complex problems. Citizens in many countries follow this political right-turn with anguish, but believe they can do little to hinder the autocratic tendencies. Others turn their heads away from politics and renounce their involvement in public affairs as futile. A third group still believes that not all has been lost. We are this third group, but we are getting fewer and fewer.

Can citizens stop the autocratic upsurge? It is the responsibility of politics to present alternatives to autocratic tendencies. However, at the end of the day, it is the citizens, who can make a difference. Those citizens are not simply born, but they must be made, or better said, educated: therefore it is a key task to strengthen citizenship education, to make people understand their rights, obligations and possibilities in shaping their future.

Who can provide citizenship education?

Schools

It is usually the state's prerogative, at least in Hungary. This is a key problem: in a country where the state (meaning basically the governing party) has a strict control not only over the schools, but also over "what" and "how" students are to be taught, the autocratic values will inevitably creep into education. When the sovereignty of schools and the independence of teachers are not respected, when the system is based on loyalty and not on achievement, it is unrealistic to expect real citizenship education. A telling example is the huge gap between the textbook of citizenship education for 12th grade students, and the democratic reality in Hungary. The textbook advocates open debates in the schoolroom, moderated roundtables, staged TV debates, suggests press conferences or investigative journalism to approach issues like liberty, democracy, etc. Nothing would be farther of the reality. If the students follow real life politics, they soon discover that real debates, the presentation of conflicting views discussed in a civilized manner, are fading away



from the political scene in Hungary. Lacking a democratic atmosphere in school, students are not encouraged to form and voice their opinion.

A mandatory community service of 50 hours was introduced in 2016, for all high school students. This may sound like a good idea to prepare citizens to bear more responsibility for their communities or being sensitive to social problems, but the implementation falls often short of the expectations. The administration, the civil sector and the schools themselves are not really prepared for organizing community work in a meaningful way, thus only 15% of the students feel it useful, more than 50% said in a recent poll that it was a total waste of time.

Interestingly though, the faith in democracy grows: in 2012 only 40 percent of the young people said democracy was the best possible system, while in 2016 55 % voiced this opinion.

Media

As a journalist, I have always believed in the educating effect of a good, objective and critical media. After all, we cannot trust only the schools with the task to educate the future generations, parents also have a strong responsibility to bring up children who respect each other, tolerate differences and will become responsible citizens. We as parents cannot shrug off this responsibility.

The media is, however, in a bad shape, being divided to critical and government loyal troops, fighting a virtual media war. As the opposition has weakened to non-existence, the government views that last remnants of the critical media as their enemy and does everything to destroy it. As the media is busily dealing with shooting at each other, it is unreasonable to expect that they will - even the critical or professional part of it - fulfill its function as "educators". On the other hand, the effects of harmful propaganda are already seen in the society, (e.g. fear of migration, excessive loyalty to the government). Critical thinking or criticism is not tolerated. As the government achieved another supermajority in April this year, a massive offensive has been launched against the last remnants of independent thinking in Hungary: culture and research.

Civil society

The third major actor in citizenship education is the civil sector. But do we have a chance? Are citizens able to see their own responsibility in shaping the future? The ground experience shows that the interest of the general public is very low in anything which is not closely inked to their everyday life. Just the sheer experience of being confronted with a variety of opinions, which do not necessarily match one's own conviction, can lead to an uncomfortable situation, which shall be avoided. As we at CEID are organizing events in the countryside, it is palpable that people are suspicious, they do not want to make the very minimal effort to have more information about the world, because it is too confusing. The propaganda created a bubble in which they can quietly fear anything which comes from the outside world, but it is reassuring that the state/governing party is overall, and will do anything to protect them.

The paradox is that in a society which is increasingly interwoven by fear, it needs a lot of courage to stand up for your rights and break out of this government-created bubble. But the system and the atmosphere will never change, if you are not willing to take a risk.

