

Learning Democracy and Human Rights

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First of all I would like to thank the organizers for their invitation to this colloquium and this for different reasons. I had the privilege to have a very close look at the implementation of the programs of Education for Democratic Citizenship as Minister of Education in Luxembourg from 1999 to 2004 and then as a member and later until January 2010 the Chair of the Committee of Culture, Science and Education of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe.

Today I am glad to see that a lot of excellent work has been done at all levels, but that there remains still a lot to be done. I was quite impressed by the presentation of the coordinators this morning. What we need now is a map road for further actions.

“Everyone has the right to education. (...) Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups.”

These principles were agreed upon by the General Assembly of the United Nations in 1948 as Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Just as education is

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a continuous process, those principles are as valid and important as they were more than 60 years ago.

Already in the 1950s, education was recognised as an enforceable human right under the European Convention on Human Rights.² It was regarded as a necessary requirement for building a democratic Europe³ after a devastating world war, the Holocaust and several years of totalitarian rule and education in Germany and a few other states. Once the so-called Iron Curtain had fallen twenty years ago and the Council of Europe was able to accept new democratic member states, human rights education became a new priority for the Council of Europe.⁴

The project Education for Democratic Citizenship was initiated by the Standing Conference of European Ministers of Education 13 years ago.⁵ Is it necessary to continue this project? Yes, definitely – the Parliamentary Assembly emphasised this on several occasions, and I am sure this conference supports this conclusion.

I want to recall the Assembly Recommendation 1849 (2008) on the promotion of a culture of democracy and human rights through teacher education.

² Protocol of 1952 to the European Convention on Human Rights, Article 2 – Right to education: “No person shall be denied the right to education. In the exercise of any functions which it assumes in relation to education and to teaching, the State shall respect the right of parents to ensure such education and teaching in conformity with their own religious and philosophical convictions.”

³ The Preamble to the European Cultural Convention of 1954 states: “Considering that the aim of the Council of Europe is to achieve a greater unity between its members for the purpose, among others, of safeguarding and realising the ideals and principles which are their common heritage; Considering that the achievement of this aim would be furthered by a greater understanding of one another among the peoples of Europe; (...) Having resolved to conclude a general European Cultural Convention designed to foster among the nationals of all members, and of such other European States as may accede thereto, the study of the languages, history and civilisation of the others and of the civilisation which is common to them all”.

⁴ Resolution (95) 38 of the Committee of Ministers on the Council of Europe’s cultural strategy selected as priorities the following three objectives: “fostering democratic values and human rights according to a common cultural approach; building confidence and mutual respect between nations and communities; promoting awareness of the cultural community of the new Europe enriched by its diversity.”

⁵ Resolution on fundamental values, aims and the future role of educational co-operation in the Council of Europe, adopted at the 19th session of the Standing Conference of European Ministers of Education (Kristiansand, Norway, 22-24 June 1997)

This proposal had already been formulated in 2004 in the Assembly's Recommendation 1682 on education for Europe. A lot has been done and achieved in this field since then, but we are still waiting for a more institutionalised framework for human rights education and education for democratic citizenship.

Aristotle⁶ is quoted as having said more than 2000 years ago: "All, who have meditated on the art of governing mankind, have been convinced that the fate of empires depends on the education of youth." Hitler, Stalin, Mussolini, Franco and other dictators misused this principle and controlled school education and excluded critical students from universities. In Europe of today, only Belarus dismisses critical students from their university.

But we must not leave this wisdom to the enemies of human rights and democracy. Any democratic society must put great emphasis on educating young people in the spirit of democracy and human rights.

Condorcet, a French philosopher, mathematician and politician wrote in 1791 "que chacun soit assez instruit pour exercer lui-même, et sans se soumettre aveuglément à la raison d'autrui, ses droits légaux."

It is not enough to have the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg pass judgments after violations have occurred. Democracy and human rights must be an inalienable part of our education and culture, in order to prevent such violations. This approach is part of the

⁶ 384 – 322 BC

decisions taken in Interlaken last February on the future of the European Court of Justice.

Effective educational reforms have to start with teachers. The Assembly addressed this in the mentioned Recommendation 1849. Education must also be innovative. Here I can cite the Assembly Recommendation 1884 on cultural education: the promotion of cultural knowledge, creativity and intercultural understanding through education, Recommendation 1836 on realising the full potential of e-learning for education and training, Recommendation 1720 on education and religion and Recommendation 1880 on history teaching in conflict and post-conflict areas.

While it was necessary to build up a European dimension in education over the past decades, we can say that most students of today are European. It remains necessary, however, to build up a human rights dimension in our societies. Political and religious extremism, social and cultural exclusion, as well as a loss of identity in a globalised world make our societies vulnerable to intolerance and violence. All states in Europe must step up their efforts in combating those phenomena. We need more and better human rights education in Europe and beyond Europe.

The majority of people think that education to democracy is no longer necessary and we all would be glad to agree. Unfortunately we know that this is far from being true.

In a world where access to information is no longer a problem, we must note that very often basic notions, even among educated people, are lacking.

If it seems obvious that in the young democracies there is still a need to fill the gap in the field of culture for learning

democracy, it is alarming to see that most of the citizens of the so called old democracies just don't care about their rights and their duties.

I want to take one example: that of the lack of participation in elections. Our ancestors have fought for decades in order to get the universal right to vote. Today most of us take this for granted. Until recently in some countries like Portugal, Liechtenstein or certain regions of Switzerland women didn't have the right to vote.

I just want to give one figure about the participation in elections: In 1979 63 % of the voters participated in the European elections, whereas the participation rate dropped to 43.4 % in 2009.

This shows clearly that most of the people aren't aware of the importance of the functioning of democratic institutions and that the democratic system just can work if every single person takes his or her responsibility.

This also shows clearly that we have to make more efforts in teaching democracy and underline that rights never can be seen alone but that they go along with responsibilities and duties.

This single example of voter turnout shows clearly that we have to take our responsibility in order to improve learning democracy and human rights. This is not only a task for politicians and people from the education field. We all are concerned.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The results of this conference shall be submitted to the 23rd session of the Standing Conference of European Ministers of Education in Slovenia later this year. Therefore, I should like to make the following formal proposal: the ministers should be asked to support amending the European Cultural Convention in order to shift the focus to education for human rights and democracy and make this convention more relevant for European states and more interesting for non-European states to accede to.

To conclude I want to quote Erich Kästner: “Es gibt nichts Gutes, ausser man tut es”.

I want to add one more proposal.

The participants just sang Happy Birthday to one of the experts. Couldn't we suggest to create, to compose a song about and for democracy.