



Lab 13 - Civic education – how does it increase resilience to populism?

Moderators:

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Initiative:

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Discussants:

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The lab in brief

Civic education is an important tool that societies and institutions can use to fight the rise of authoritarian governments or populist movements. It consists in increasing citizens' critical thinking in order to allow everyone to understand different political situations and to take a stand in the one that is considered as the best, not as a result of a general consensus but based on an effective reasoning.

In a nutshell, civic education is the study of the rights and the responsibilities related to the exercise of citizenship, included an understanding of governmental operations. It is the subject that makes citizens aware of their role in the society and helps them to get involved in the political decision-making system. As a result, it helps government to be more effective.

In this perspective the format of civic and political education programmes must be adapted to different national contexts.

The purpose of the lab is to understand if a general decision to introduce or empower this type of education could protect citizens from general beliefs and the spreading of movements that are against democratic institutions.

About the initiatives

Political Education at Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (Germany)

Civic education was indispensable in building a liberal democracy in the Federal Republic after 1945 and in reunited Germany after 1989. While there was an immediate link to the experience of totalitarian rule in the early days, civic education is today confronted by new challenges, in particular the rise of political extremism, as proved by last elections. Such reality makes necessary to connect politicians and citizens, through education. Civic education gives, in fact, citizens tools to perceive political changes and to understand the on-going situation. The German model of civic education is a comprehensive approach consisting of:

- Political education given by the state in schools;
- Political education learnt in the civil society;
- Civic education given by the church;
- Civic education given by federal and regional agencies;
- Political education given by foundations.

The first one, which should be the first and the easiest to implement, is not adequately provided, this is the reason why civic education needs to be de-centralised, so that it can be more non-oriented and varied. In Germany there is more than one foundation focusing on this topic, using different tools and ideas to attract young people. The "Smart Camps" initiative is just one of the on-going projects implemented by the Adenauer Foundation. It is based on the idea that social networks can be used to disseminate political and civic values. During these 3-4 day camps, pupils have the chance to meet experts, such as bloggers and youtubers, and to create anti-populism campaign themselves, by learning how to use digital tools and social networks in a professional way. Teachers can also participate in these activities in order to capitalise on these tools and information for their teaching activities.

Key points issues by the debate

Education strategies to face the populist challenge. Any education effort made to tackle populism should first of all focus on the feelings that populism use to rise (e.g. the fact that people don't feel represented etc.). The European project emerged from the second global war, based on the idea that welfare should be guaranteed to everyone and on the principle of respecting minorities. It was, therefore, the strategy of making citizens feel included that made possible to build democratic societies. Populism tries to undermine such history and memories. In this perspective, civic education should be strictly connected with history, making people aware of the importance of a common past. Besides, populism should be fought with their same tools, in particular through media (e.g. by focusing on fake news, critical thinking skills, etc.). European media tend to be too homogeneous, and such lack of diversification is not good in regard to education. A greater media diversification needs to be addressed, included the construction of new narratives. Education has not only to target citizens, but also the ruling elites in order for them to be better able to rule and to communicate with their citizens.

To avoid tokenism and any rhetorical approach, the aims of civic education must be clarified in advance; otherwise these education efforts could easily replicate populist contents. In this perspective, populist parties are not the main danger: mainstream parties, addressing citizens in a rhetorical way, could appear even more dangerous.

Pre-conditions for an effective civic education. Civic education can play an effective role in making societies more resilient to populism, if the following elements are adequately taken into consideration.

1. Do we understand what we are talking about with the concept of civic education? Political and civic educations are, in fact, used in the same way, but civic education is more focused on awareness raising actions.
2. Who delivers it?
3. How is it delivered? In fact, the Adenauer foundation seems to arrive just to one type of audience, the youth.
4. Who regulates civic education? Who sets the standards and the conditions? Does it only work in progressive democratic states?
5. In which contexts is it delivered? For example, in case of youth unemployment, how do we ensure that the targeted audience can practise the skills promoted by civic education?

Civic education is not a panacea to populism, but we need to ensure to be prepared for issues that are equally demanding. Often, it is taken as an approach that is just for weak target group, but it must address everyone. Populism makes people lazy, as it brings them to passively blame institutions without adopting a proactive attitude to make things change. The whole education system must change, as the present one is based on a passive learning and not on key transversal competences.

Civic education as a joint effort. Civic education is not only a responsibility of public institutions. Lab participants agreed that an important role is also played by private networks, such as religious organisations, and by the families themselves. In other terms, civic education is not an isolated subject, but a comprehensive approach, whose main aim is to teach people to be more creative and to develop critical thinking skills to effectively and constructively challenge own political and social environment.

Recommendations

- ✓ To develop a comprehensive understanding of civic education through the joint involvement of institutions, young people, their families and their communities from all social groups.
- ✓ To tailor civic education and generally education to each context in order to identify concrete solutions with simple messages to pressing, real problems in the “outward” agenda, close to people’s needs.
- ✓ To identify clear responsibilities, in particular who standardises the courses and who delivers them, otherwise the State could easily instrumentalise it.