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## State-Orchestrated Civic Education versus Civic Competences of School Students: Some Conceptual Implications from a National Case Study

“School has always been a major factor in preparing young people for citizenship and active participation in social life. This role is especially important in societies undergoing major social transformation, such as the transition from a totalitarian to a democratic system in Bulgaria. The status, goal and scope of civic education cannot be understood without taking into account the social and historical context within which ideas of democracy and citizenship were developed.” (Balkansky, Zahariev, Stoyanov, Stoyanova 1999, 90)

Imagine a situation in which civic education has been enforced and practiced for nearly a decade and, as a result, the civic competences of the young people have dramatically decreased as compared with the previous national level. This situation is not a fictional one. It depicts the findings of a cross-national longitudinal survey. How come a generation which had not been exposed to the influence of civic education performed better in civic competences as compared with their followers a decade later? Who is to blame? The school teachers – for not having fulfilled their obligations? The school system – for failing to accomplish its socialization task? Or the particular civic education program – for being fake or ill-designed? Or may be we, the social scientists, have been unduly naïve about our expectations of civic education and its implementation in schools?

The more important question is: *to what extent does civic education fit in naturally with school life without clashing with it? Or put in another way, isn't the classical tradition in the modern school essentially in contradiction with civic education?* This problem takes the particular (Bulgarian) case beyond the boundaries of its national specificity and situates it at the level of a much more general question of the limits and preconditions of applicability of civic education, especially in regard to the expectation that it will form active citizens, capable of improving the democratic self-regulation of modern societies.

The paper argues that the results of civic education should not be assessed in abstract form apart from the major factors concerning the socio-cultural, institutional and educational context. They are significantly dependent on the character of the national curriculum and the socialization programme specific for each country. Furthermore, schools, in their turn, are highly dependent on the role of civil society in the respective national societies, which feature vastly varying political cultures. *The large portion of very low education achievements cannot be adduced to civic education per se, but to the wider alienation of young people from school life.*

### Keywords:

civic education; cross-country comparative studies; education reform

### 1. The Cognitive Puzzle

Usually social scientists and civic education activists believe that through education we can improve the civic potential of any single national society and thus we can strengthen the democratic consolidation, the stability and social fairness of public life. It seems we only need to enforce civic education in our schools and then civic competences will inevitably flourish. Measuring the outcome by cross-national surveys could be the only concern we might have.

If this basic assumption about the transformative role of civic education is correct we would encounter a paradox: it would be unthinkable to have a situation in which civic education is introduced in public schools as an obligatory component of the curriculum and has been practiced for nearly a decade. And, as a result, the civic competences of the young people who had gone through the respective education have ... dramatically decreased as compared with the previous national level.

Yet, life is tricky. The situation described above is not an imaginary one. It depicts the findings about Bulgaria in a cross-national longitudinal survey.<sup>1</sup> How come a generation which had not been exposed to the influence of civic education performed better in civic competences as compared with their followers a decade later? Who is to blame? The school teachers – for not having fulfilled their duties? The school system – for failing to accomplish its socialization task? Or the particular civic education program – for being fake or ill-designed? Or may be we, the social scientists have been unduly naïve about our expectations of civic education and its implementation in schools?

Obviously the answers to these questions are not mutually exclusive and, hence, there is a need for some more careful consideration of the three major concerns – what is civic education; how can it be successfully implemented; how is it possible to measure its results cross-nationally as if it is universal (neutral to the country-specific cultural context)? We might get agreeable answers to these questions by ca-

1 International Civic and Citizenship Education Study. (<http://iccs.acer.edu.au/uploads/ICCS%20Assessment%20Framework/ICCS%202008%20Full.pdf>).



refully examining the context of the above-mentioned drastic failure of the national civic education program (and its supplementing school practices) in search for any long-range/deep rooted factors determining the scope and effects of civic education reforms.<sup>2</sup>

## 2. The Civilizing Mission of Civic Education as a Standard of its Quality

Civic activeness is a *conditio sine qua non* for modern societies, but it is also a condition that is not guaranteed by the nature of public life. It has to be deliberately cultivated. Hence, the escalating need for civic education, due both to the *fatigue* caused by the burden of our contemporary civilization (Mamardashvili 2004) and to the *growing alienation* from representative democracy, alienation that, in Europe, is enhanced by the “democratic deficit” of EU’s political mechanisms (Hix 2008). Civic education is the policy and everyday practice – in school and beyond-school – of the formation of civic attitudes, skills, and competencies without which the self-regulation of complex modern societies would be ineffective and eventually end in incapacity for social-economic development.

This is precisely why *particularly high hopes* are set on civic education in the societies where authoritarian or totalitarian political regimes have prevailed for decades (for instance, Turkey or Portugal and the post-communist societies, of course). It is the mission of such education to change the current political culture and behavioral models of general subordination to the state, towards a *new type of self-awareness leading to active participation in the self-governance and development of society*. But this is where the main problem lies: will civic education fulfill its assigned task of serving as a basic instrument of civilizational change or, conversely, will the social environment transform this specific education in its own fashion, tame it so that it might fit in with the current institutional practices and value models? The answer is not self-obvious and needs some empirical justification.

In fact, the essence of civic education assumed here is not much different from that generally held in pre-

sent-day specialized literature (Delanty 2003; Crick 2000; Heater 1990; Holford and Edirisingha 2000; Jones, Gaventa 2002; Leach, Scoones 2003). Yet, it complies with the standards of the international comparative study on the performance of school students in civic education, on which the discussion below will be based.<sup>3</sup>

The definition used is quite comprehensive, taking citizenship and civic education as referring to knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours of civic activeness. A key feature of this perspective is that the individual student is given a central place; more importantly, citizenship is interpreted in terms of affiliation with *networks of horizontal social communities*.<sup>4</sup> The specificities of this perspective are highly significant. On one hand, to be a citizen means to *take an active part in communities*, and this entails assuming roles (a stable set of public activities), rights, responsibilities, and having capacities, i.e., these are the attributes of a social subject. Communities, in their turn, are defined by their autonomy and self-management *on a contractual basis*. On the other hand, citizenship involves commitment to supporting *social development*.

In this definition of citizenship, the state is entirely missing, even though *statehood is a component of the interpretation of the systems of a modern socio-political system, of a ‘polity’ – something for which there is not even a designating word in the Bulgarian language*. But a very notable feature of this interpretation is that “state” is not meant as an indivisible whole; instead, the reference is to *many and different “state institutions”*, specified according to the rank and scope of their competencies (moreover, they are juxtaposed in a system of citizenship comporting a multiplicity of *equal in value non-governmental institutions*).

None of these key characteristics is relevant to any post-totalitarian or post-authoritarian society where the prioritized loyalty to Fatherland is supposed to equal total, *unconditional obedience to the nation state*.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, all these societies would claim that they have pertinent civic education.<sup>6</sup>

2 „it is necessary to go beyond static, universalised and essentialised notions of citizenship and a singular notion of the state, to embrace a more fluid, de-centred, and experience-based notion of both citizenship and expertise, but without losing sight of the historical, political and institutional structures which shape often highly contrasting forms of engagement.“ (Leach and Scooner 2001, 4).

3 International Civic and Citizenship Education Study. (<http://iccs.acer.edu.au/uploads/ICCS%20Assessment%20Framework/ICCS%202008%20Full.pdf>).

4 Ibid., 16.

5 For example, on the eve of implementing civic education in Bulgarian schools a local Expert Panel comprised of representatives from the Ministry of Education and Science, universities, non-governmental organizations, teachers, school principals, politicians and school administrators sat to define the meaning of that educational novelty (Balkansky et al. 1999, 94-95). In ranking the

value and logical emphases of the meanings of civic education, the Bulgarian experts have placed the State *in first place*. Given the history of the country, it is understandable that “civil society”, or the least “community”, do not appear at all as referring to *the horizontal interaction between citizens*. What is given high priority are the *national identity and national loyalty*... Elections appear at the lowest rank of importance on the list of objectives of civic education in Bulgaria, and they only figure as *an element of knowledge about the legal order of the country*...

6 “In the past, within the framework of communist propaganda, the concept of citizenship was related to the notion of true inhabitants, that is, those who are loyal to the State, have a high level of patriotism and acknowledge their dependence on the national state. Nowadays, there is widespread agreement that citizenship is related not only to the State but also to membership in a civic society and to humankind as a whole.” (Balkansky et al 1999, 91).



Seeing this, the reader is attuned to realize the basic conflict that is the object of the current study. "Citizenship" is an idea and practice, whose dimensions are diametrically opposite in a liberal-democratic and in a post-totalitarian society. Therefore, it is logical, viewed by the standards of a totalitarian interpretation of the term, for democratic practices to seem incomplete or "deficient" in relation to the ideal of an individual dissolved in the national mystic and quasi-organic unity of the state (Karpenko 2007). The opposite is also true: seen through the prism of liberal democracy, the totalitarian practice of citizenship and civic education would appear highly "malfunctioning." In this sense, one and the same achievements in civic education, measured on the scale of the two types of citizenship, might show opposite results. "Bad" results according to one of them could be interpreted as "good" according to the other.

### 3. National Achievements in an International Comparative Perspective – a Case Study

Bulgaria is a country which has smoothly gone through its phase of post-communist transition to become an EU member state in 2007 (together with Romania under the conditionality of a constant monitoring and verification mechanism). Though it is the poorest country in terms of GDP or purchase power per capita, it is a typical South-Eastern European country in terms of institutional arrangements, public mentalities, cultural patterns, underdevelopment of civil society and active nationalistic legacies. A process of de-ideologization of education has begun as early as 1991 and a kind of civil education at all school levels was officially enforced in 2000.

In general, at a glimpse, the data for Bulgaria in the field of civic education, obtained from the Ministry of Education or institutions related to it, show that the national results appear to be among the highest in Europe, and, for certain parameters, it has even surpassed West European countries (Kolarova 2002; Balkansky et al. 1999). But looking more carefully at the data, one would find that they refer to state activities and to successes in the normative legalization of civic education as a component of the national curriculum [enacting of a specific law enforcing civic education and even a mature exam in this subject, provision of State requirements that guide the textbook writing and the expected outcomes of the teaching process, etc.]. Yet, these are not results referring to the degree of civic culture assimilated by school students or civic competences, which are precisely the purpose of civic education.<sup>7</sup>

In this connection, the latest data, obtained in the comparative study cited above and published in July 2010, are exceptionally important, as they focus

exactly on the effectiveness of civic education. The empirical data for Bulgaria, especially viewed against the backdrop of optimistic government reports, might seem frankly shocking:

*Bulgaria stands in one of the last places in Europe (only Cyprus is behind it) and, generally, at the bottom of the ranking of all 38 countries. The total result for Bulgaria is 466 points, whereas the average score for all countries is 500 points. Bulgaria is in the company of countries like Cyprus, Greece, Guatemala, Luxembourg, and Mexico. But for them the general report states: "a substantially large share of the students attend schools the directors of which report that civic education is not part of the school curriculum for the surveyed target group [of 14-year old eight-graders]."*<sup>8</sup> But in Bulgaria it is part of the curriculum, and, judging by the answers of teachers in that survey, civic education is taught intensively as a routine element of the general education process and extra-class activities.

*Bulgaria holds a record for the greatest decline in the performance of students in the target group when compared against the performance of students of the same age in 1999.*

These findings give sufficient reasons to carefully scrutinize the details of the empirically registered picture. The data contain telling elements that point to an explanation of the dismal results of civic education in Bulgarian schools.

Looking closer at the structure of the distribution of schoolstudents' responses, it appears that at the mid-levels of assimilation of civic education, Bulgarian students do not differ much from those in other countries: the share of students covering first educational level is 26 percent, as much as the average value in the entire surveyed population for all countries. At second level the Bulgarian result is 27 percent, whereas the average value at this level for all countries is 31 percent: here the deviation is still tolerable.

*The great problem is that only a small portion of students have assimilated civic education at the third and highest level: whereas the general average for all countries is 28 percent, for Bulgaria it is only 20 percent. The main difference is that a significant portion of students remains below the first level: in our country they are 27 percent, while the average value for the other countries is 16 percent. The general tendency registered is crystal clear – the higher the level the poorer the educational outcome....In brief, the Bulgarian problem is that, on one hand, too few students achieve*

7 It is only fair to point out that the further back we look in time, the more normal it was to emphasize de-communication in school education and institutional-normative innovations in civic education. It was still too early then to assess the results of the reforms.

8 Initial Findings from the IEA ICCS 2010, 64.  
(<http://iccs.acer.edu.au/index.php?page=initial-findings>).



ve the high goals of civic education, those manifested in an active civic standpoint, while on the other hand, too many students do not attain even the basics from this education process.

This conclusion raises the question as to whether the civic education formally conducted fails to achieve its aims or, on the contrary, it does achieve them, but, those aims are specific to the local conditions [thus their results, measured on the scale of liberal democratic culture, seem “unsatisfactory”]? Of course, the indicated alternative hypotheses are far from being mutually exclusive, and this is why it is reasonable to continue the detailed examination of the empirical data.

First of all, we should specify *the contents of the highest level of assimilation of civic education, which proves to be beyond the capacity of 80 percent of Bulgarian eighth-graders*. Its specific contents include *skills of understanding and analyzing civic issues leading to the formation of a personal standpoint*.<sup>9</sup> The high level of assimilation of civic education *involves the capacity for exceptionally complex intellectual activities*, in which a young person independently builds his/her *standpoint of interpretation and evaluation, of explanation and defense, regarding the problems of civil society and civic engagement*.

Thus, there are in fact two essential problems involved:

1) whether the teaching process *consistently envisages these competencies* as goals of civic education?

2) whether in the course of school life, and not only in the classes devoted to civic education, *there are conditions conducive to alienation of students from civic issues and from school life in general* (which would answer the question as to the excessively large share of students who have not attained even the first level of civic education)?

The problem is whether the intellectual activities in question are actually practiced in the course of the routine teaching process in schools. This can be judged by the answers of teachers regarding the four basic elements of their teaching practice: how they teach, how they evaluate students, how they see the aims of civic education, and, most importantly, how the performance of students in the classroom stimulates lasting assimilation and practice of the above-mentioned intellectual skills. The data obtained from the international comparative study are very symptomatic.<sup>10</sup>

Keeping in mind this picture of the way of teaching, it is hardly surprising that the methods of evaluation also *correspond to the traditional school practices* and clash with the values and methodological imperatives of civic education.<sup>11</sup>

Consequently, it is imperative to ask – how do Bulgarian teachers generally see the value priorities and aims of civic education per se? The empirical picture unveils a complete inversion: the traditional educational goal of supplying ready-made knowledge is the most strongly accentuated one, while the goal specific to civic education – *forming civic activeness* – is

9 “Reasoning and analyzing refers to the ways in which students use civic and citizenship information to reach conclusions that are broader than the contents of any single concept. Reasoning extends from the direct application of knowledge and understanding to reach conclusions about familiar concrete situations through to the selection and assimilation of knowledge and understanding of multiple concepts. These outcomes are then used to reach conclusions about complex, multifaceted, unfamiliar, and abstract situations,” 27. (<http://iccs.acer.edu.au/uploads/ICCS%20Assessment%20Framework/ICCS%202008%20Full.pdf>).

10 “Teachers widely rely on the traditional methods and forms of teaching, such as: direct dialogue between the teacher and the student through asking and answering questions (39% – very often, 30% – often) and work with texts from schoolbooks (40% – very often, 26% – often). Less often used are the forms and methods of teaching that require active participation of students, such as:

The teacher includes discussion on controversial issues (18% – very often, 27% – often)

The students research and analyze information from different sources (14% – very often, 29% – often).

Least often used are those methods and forms of teaching in which students independently plan, organize and carry out concrete activities, specifically:

The students work independently on various topics and prepare presentations (5% – very often, 24% – often)

The students work in groups on different topics and prepare presentations (5% – very often, 19% – often)

The students develop projects that require gathering information outside of school (4% – very often, 15% – often)

The students take part in role-playing games and simulations (8% – very often, 14% – often).

Without underestimating the importance of each of these forms and methods of teaching, and of many others, we may say that precisely the last group refers to the forms and methods that ought to be applied most widely in civic education. The data show that these are precisely the methods and forms least used by teachers. One of the probable explanations for this is that a large part of the teachers do not feel themselves sufficiently trained to use them.” (Petrova 2010, 35-36).

11 “A considerable part of the teachers still prefer to rely on the traditional forms of evaluation, which consist in oral examination (29% – very often и 30% – often); observing the students (22% – very often, 19% – often) etc. Comparatively rarely used forms of evaluation are those that permit active participation of students and very often provide greater opportunities for independent work, such as: self-evaluation of students (3% – very often, 12% – often); mutual evaluation of students (2% – very often, 7% – often) and of projects (2% – very often, 8% – often).” (Ibid., 36).

*practically absent from the practices of Bulgarian schools.*<sup>12</sup>

This is also the reason for the focused curiosity about the data on the degree of *openness of the school environment to students' free expression of opinion in the course of the teaching process*. It would hardly be surprising for the reader that there are simply no data on this problem in the report on Bulgaria. But a very indicative fact is that the summary report for the entire comparative study is extremely vague.<sup>13</sup> This is a very important issue and it needs re-examination below. It is worth noting that teachers encourage, to the highest degree, their students *to express opinions*: they do this in 50 percent of the cases, but inasmuch as current *political problems* are generally *not* discussed in class – in 60 percent of the cases.

The question here is: *to what extent does civic education fit in naturally with school life without conflicting with it, or is the classical tradition in the modern school essentially in contradiction with civic education, and hence obstructive to teaching it in school?*

Put in this way, the question takes the Bulgarian case beyond the boundaries of its national specificity and situates it at the level of the much more general question as to the limits and conditions of applicability of civic education, especially as regards the expectation that it will form active citizens, competent to improve the democratic self-regulation of modern societies.

The central thesis here argued is that civic education manages to 'fit in' *only at the cost of a great compromise*: it is given room within the system *only insofar as it suits the system by changes in character*. From being a tool for social transformation (or for the stabilization of democracy), it turns into a channel for conveying values, principles and practices of the status quo of the national political system *and* of the educational system imbedded in it.

In fact *the big problem is that this transformation of values and methodology occurs almost imperceptibly* and, in any case, tacitly. That is precisely why the mechanisms for its occurrence must be investigated care-

fully, especially in the light of the circumstance that civic education is not something given as self-evident but involves a struggle between various stakes and jealous stakeholders (Dimitrov, Boyadjieva 2009).

The entire national education system must change beforehand with respect to contents, values, and especially procedures and methods, enabling and guaranteeing the development of students as personalities; only then the novelty of civic education will be able to enter the mainstream practice. And this immediately opens the floor for a discussion of the causes that would explain why it has not been possible *so far*, if this noble goal is accessible at all.<sup>14</sup>

#### 4. But Why So? – In Search for Explanatory Factors

Stated most generally, in a country that is parting with its totalitarian past with difficulty and in an inconsistent manner [registered by many local surveys and studies], its many hot social issues and the series of crises it has undergone seem to naturally marginalize the educational reform [making it a task for which the time is not yet ripe, even though changes have been made unceasingly in the educational system over the last 20 years]. In such a country there is no political agent that looks upon the educational reform as a real policy priority, even though it is not rare for political parties to pay lip service to the importance of education. However, practice has shown that when they come to power, these parties do not fulfill their declared intentions. Even more importantly, civic education is not emphasized in any of the party programmes. As it has often been noted recently, the big problem for effective introduction of the kind of civic education that will form active and responsible citizens does not lie in the open resistance it encounters, but in the lack of influential stakeholders interested in its realization...

That is precisely why, for example, the Bulgarian ministry of education tends to introduce civic education mostly under external pressure rather than because it holds it as an element of its strategy for

12 "We presented the teachers with a list of possible objectives of civic education in school, from which they had to choose three that they felt were the most important. This is how teachers in Bulgaria ranked the objectives of civic education in school:

61% of the teachers indicated as the most important objective of this discipline that it must develop knowledge about the rules and responsibilities applying to citizens.

56% – that is should develop knowledge about the historical and cultural heritage of the country.

43% – it should promote attention regarding the environment and its protection.

The smallest percentage of teachers indicated as important objectives of civic education that it should assist the development of effective strategies for fighting racism and xenophobia (4%) and promote active political participation (3%)."(Ibid., 34).

13 The resulting six-item scale measuring student perceptions of openness in classroom discussions had a satisfactory reliability of 0.76 for the international ICCS database with equally weighted national samples. Figure 6 in Appendix D presents an item-by-score map for students' perceptions of openness in classroom discussions. It shows that, on average across countries, students reported that most of these events occurred at least "sometimes". The percentages of students who "often" observed these events ranged from 52 ("encouraged to express opinions") to 11 percent ("students bringing up current events in class"). Initial Findings from the IEA ICCS 2010, 72–73., (<http://iccs.acer.edu.au/index.php?page=initial-findings>).

14 The answers to these questions will also lead, as a by-product, to an understanding of the essential local fact of some international relevance: Bulgarian teachers in their vast numbers say they are not sufficiently prepared and do not have appropriate resources to teach civic education, even though the latter is set as an educational requirement by the state (Petrova 2010, 36-37).



educational reform. External pressure is primarily coming from abroad in connection with long-term programmes of influential international organizations – UN, Council of Europe, the World Bank, etc., and in second place – from local NGOs who benefit from donations from foreign or international institutions (Dimitrov, Boyadjieva 2009). The lack of enduring public and political interest in the success of the educational reform leads to a situation where, even when such a reform is started under external pressure (in the Bulgarian case, under pressure coming from the World Bank), the end result is a devastating failure of the reform.<sup>15</sup>

Under these preconditions *it is simply inevitable that the concrete project for civic education will mostly reflect the underdevelopment of the national civil society* rather than be a long-term resource for the sustainable construction and development of that society. An exceptionally important point is that this underdevelopment of civil society is evident at a *number of levels and under different forms*. Its most important aspect, of course, is the lack of a governance policy that would express the social consensus for minimizing the role of the state in public life, all-powerful and without alternative. From this point onwards, educational innovations will inevitably be a result – varying and depending on the circumstances – of the total, integrated impact of a number of factors:

1. In such a society there is no tradition for ministries to develop their policies through dialogue with the addressees of the public policies. The ministry of education makes no exception. The most important result of the lack of good governance is the national school curriculum which is devised by certain anonymous persons in an utterly non-transparent way. The projects of this curriculum and changes made in it have never been a topic of public debate between education experts and public stakeholders. The staff of the Council for Curriculum Planning is selected by the minister alone, and the arbitrary way in which this institution is constructed precludes, as a rule, the possibility that it will bear responsibility before the public.
2. In these circumstances it is perfectly normal that the contents – and even more the structure – of the national curriculum proves to be a *compromise at the given moment between the corporatist interests of stake-holding professional categories/guilds that enter into very complicated schemes and internal opposition* (Dimitrov, Stoykova 2009). In particular, the question of the status of civic education in Bulgaria turns out to be resolved by:
  - 2.1 the opposed ambitions of different teachers' guilds (backed by their textbook publishers) of geography, history, literature, philosophy who succeeded to dissolve civic education as contents of their traditional subjects;
  - 2.2 the lack of interest of the teachers' professional community (pedagogical experts), which meanwhile has a strong position in the universities training future teachers (this disinterest is basically due to the small chances they have of obtaining a monopoly influence over the new discipline of civic education); and
  - 2.3 the inertness of the sociological and political communities as guilds: they do not identify any strategic interest of their own in the strengthening of civil society, nor, respectively, their professional stake in the development of civic education.
3. It might seem, at first glance, that the lack of a premeditated state policy for civic education is a favorable precondition for NGOs playing a decisive role in the formation of a general conception regarding this education and for the practical steps to be taken in introducing it in school. This is true to some degree, as evidenced by the examples of countries like Bulgaria, Romania, and Croatia (Dimitrov, Boyadjieva 2009). But the problem here is that:
  - 3.1 On one hand, the room for influence of NGOs is strongly dependent on the characteristics of the concrete state: for instance, in Croatia, where there is a tradition going back decades, of decentralization and local self-government, the achievements of a good number of NGOs are particularly significant, unlike countries like Bulgaria and Romania, where the achievements are both more modest and less enduring.
  - 3.2 On the other hand, it is even more important that the *specific nature of NGOs* is strongly influenced by the type of state in which they exist. As the research results indicate, the weakness of civil society in Bulgaria is evident likewise in the fact that the non-governmental sector, instead of expressing consolidated public interests as a corrective for government policies, works mostly as a supplier of professional expertise for the governmental institutions (Toneva 2011). In such an environment it is not hard to imagine that *NGO experts are, mildly speaking, serviceable towards the already established stakes of the state* (more precisely, towards the interests of coteries speaking for the state). Hence, it is no wonder that precisely the NGO representatives actively cooperate

<sup>15</sup> The grounds and details of argumentation supporting this thesis are presented in the collection *"The State Against the Reforms"* (Dimitrov 2004).



- for the realization of civic education in the framework of 'inter-subject links' and in the form of an abstract-theoretical introduction to the idea of "civil society" only.
- 3.3 This, however, does not invalidate the actual truth in the NGO representatives' assertion that the underdevelopment of the nation's civil society is a serious obstacle for society to become a reference source, a framework, and a partner in the actual teaching process.
4. The trouble described so far has a continuation. Given that civic education is dispersed in the interdisciplinary connections between traditional school subjects, a very strong possibility appears that its objectives will be substituted: instead of the spirit of civic education reforming the school environment, it is the long tradition of "classical school disciplines" ("the narrative subjects") that practically stifle the innovativeness of civic education. When inserted into the textual body of subjects like history, geography, Bulgarian language and literature, civic education has fallen victim to the biased nationalist-patriotic discourse,<sup>16</sup> instead of forming a civic discourse. Thus it falls prey to the traditional narrative stylistics and the old uncritical mentality of these subjects. By dissolving civic education into the traditional disciplines, the possibility emerges for the "long arm" of cultural pattern (i.e. of the state that has taken the place of the missing citizenship) to model and crush civil issues, including civil meanings, values, principles, and problems. In a most convenient and smooth way, memorizing substitutes critical thinking as if by the logic of the subject-matter itself.
5. But the situation is considerably more complicated. The importance of the state as a basic agent of modernization in all national societies where modernization began at a considerably later period in history should be strongly emphasized.
- 5.1 On one hand, a necessarily privileged value is attributed to the state as a center of the picture of a world depicted as a 'natural order of things' by school education, and, hence, including a supreme place for Nature in the notion of the Fatherland, and giving primacy to a past that artificially glorifies the state, etc. Hence, the natural order of things and the historical past seem to justify the lack of personal opinion and of taking a stance among students.
- 5.2 On the other hand, this does not mean that one may remain blind to the *intrusive supremacy of the state at present*, i.e. to the refusal of totalitarian power to shrink to dimensions that would be more productive and more efficient for social development.
- 5.3 But, in a third aspect, it is essential to consider what specific kind of national state we are talking about. There can be no doubt that the French national society is characterized by a strong tradition of statism, and, hence, statism marks, to a great degree, the contemporary social life in France, in sharp contrast with the countries of the Anglo-Saxon world. The specific German reverence for statehood is also well known, but with one very important difference: the long tradition there of decentralized state authority. It is not without importance *what kind of state* is referred to in school education. For instance, it is well known that, even today, the Bulgarian state is super-centralized; in fact, it is the most centralized in EU.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, unlike some other post-communist countries, it is marked by a notable lack of publicity in the principles of legal institutional order (Dimitrova-Kovacheva 2010). It should also be pointed out that a "softened state" in a post-communist society refers to a state that has fallen victim to corporatist interests and, hence, is weak and ineffective in implementing its policies (Hausner 2006). It is precisely this particular kind of state that is being legitimized by the picture of the world drawn by civic education, emphasizing the grandeur of the past and the country's natural beauties, and excluding the critical examination of the role of the state in contemporary public life.<sup>18</sup> *A question entirely excluded is the right of the citizen to resist an unjust and ineffective state government.*
6. Last but not least, it is understandable that the role of the teacher will be particularly significant where there is a lack of active state policy for developing civic education, and where NGOs show considerable servility towards the state. Seemingly, a teacher who really wanted to introduce an authentic civic education would not meet with particularly active resistance. But the question is: where may the average teacher draw the motivation and the resources for adequate civic education? In this connection a long series of decisive factors should be recalled:

16 It is quite easy to identify the persistence of a century long strong nationalistic discourse in school teaching of history and geography (Hranova 2011) or in the local tradition of the very historical knowledge itself (Daskalov 2002; Mishkova et al. 2006).

17 Cf the AER research report "From Subsidiary to success: The impact of decentralisation on economic growth." ([http://www.aer.eu/fileadmin/user\\_upload/PressComm/Publications/AER\\_Study\\_on\\_decentralisation/Studies/GB-FINAL+cover.pdf](http://www.aer.eu/fileadmin/user_upload/PressComm/Publications/AER_Study_on_decentralisation/Studies/GB-FINAL+cover.pdf)).

18 It must also be remembered that this is a state which, even though not the owner of the "means of production" any more, is still a key redistributor of the public wealth and a major consumer/assigner of public activities and services. Private business proves to be, to a great degree, dependent on the state even today – more than 20 years after the fall of communism.



- 6.1 the schoolbooks with which a teacher has to work are generally useless, since they embody the statist State Requirements and, hence, the results quoted in the national report for the international comparative study are completely logical – Bulgarian teachers, as a rule, avoid using these schoolbooks (Petrova 2010, 35).
- 6.2 one should not forget that the authentic values and principles of civic education *clash with the socialization programme of the other (old) school subjects that these teachers basically teach*. The problem is, how these two different socialization projects can “unconflictingly” come in conjunction in the work of one and the same teacher, especially if the expected result of civic education is the formation of young people with the capacity for critical thinking and for being active citizens. [And this is far from being only a Bulgarian problem: remember the authors of the summary report for the international comparative study preferred to be vague about the degree of actual freedom in the classroom activity ...]
- 6.3 this would not in itself be an obstacle for a teacher who was exceptionally motivated and unsparingly devoted to the cause of civic education. But specifically in the Bulgarian case [yet not so different from the Romanian or Ukrainian ones, for example], the crisis of the school system, which has been going on for decades now, has systematically kept in schools mostly the teachers who have difficulties making ends meet. So the fight for authentic civic education is simply beyond their reach.

School life itself is in a systematic crisis and repulses students and teachers alike, hence it is conducted in a purely formal way. The drastic deterioration of the performance of Bulgarian schoolstudents, as established recently by the consecutive TIMSS and PISA studies, indicates the incapacity of present-day schools to achieve their basic goal – to educate.

To sum up, seen through the prism of the circumstances discussed above, students’ results in civic competence registered by the international comparative study are actually not that bad. They can be assessed even as surprisingly good. *The large portion of very low education achievements cannot be adduced to civic education per se, but to the wider alienation of young people from school life, something for which civic education, as practiced in the described manner, could not possibly compensate.*

## 5. Conclusion

The main thesis is that the results of civic education taught in schools should not be assessed abstractly omitting the major factors concerning the socio-cultural, institutional and educational context. They are significantly dependent on the character of the national curriculum and the socialization programme specific for each country and embodied in the schoolbooks. But in addition to this, the results of poor civil competences are also explained by the practices of school life: schools today in general prove to be predominantly conservative. They do not create an open classroom environment conducive to the practices of active citizenship. Furthermore, schools are too dependent, alas, on the role of civil society in the respective national societies with their vastly varying democratic political cultures.

Hence, an effective reform of civic education that would stabilize and encourage civic activeness and lead to social development, *cannot be carried out apart from the reform of the education system and the democratization of public policies*. Authentic civic education as an education in democratic citizenship is a *main path to the humanization of the educational system; it should thereby serve as a solution to the long structural and value crisis of that system*. Moreover, the likelihood of substantial progress in civic education would only grow if it is perceived not as an aim in itself but *as a tool for educational and social reform; in that case, civic education would become a real political priority*.

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