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Civic Education in Estonia: Democratic or Authoritarian?

Abstract

The paper distinguishes between traditional formal and social theoretical concepts in education for democracy. On this basis, both Estonian and EU civic education systems are critically analysed. In both cases, the political literacy is not covered with adequate social theoretical concepts. Traditionally, there is a formal description of main political institutions outside of real social relations. Many social scholars have revealed that such an education but contributes to reproduction of the existing social structures.

The Author develops a social theoretical approach to democracy and civic education. It relies on main social dichotomies like that of social actors and social structures, and institutional organization theory. It defines main social actors and models of decision making in main social spheres (economy, politics and education). These concepts are linked to social values (individual freedom and prosperity or social equality, solidarity and well-being) and social outcomes (effectiveness and justice). The author also uses these concepts to describe and analyze his students' democratic knowledge, attitudes and experiences. An integration of social theoretical concepts and practices enables to achieve the ideal goals of democracy education.

The paper also critically evaluates the existing civic education system (syllabus, textbooks and national examinations) in Estonia. The system focuses on delivery of some arbitrary texts. In schools with Russian instruction, the authoritarian Estonian civic education strengthens the authoritarian national attitudes of Russian students. As a result, it counteracts to the national integration of Russian students with the Estonian state.

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Keywords

Main social actors and structures in democracy, democratic and authoritarian civic education, authoritarianism in Estonia.

Introduction

Problems of democracy education have been intensively discussed in the last decades both in Europe and worldwide (Eurydice 2005, <u>www.cicea.eu</u>). There are many concepts of and approaches to both democracy and democracy education. Even the concepts of democracy education have had different labels: civic or citizenship education, social science education, political literacy etc. This paper focuses on

political concepts necessary for critical evaluation of political processes in a democratic state. In this paper, terms like political literacy, democracy education, civic and citizenship education are considered as synonyms. The goal is to found out most general concepts that still enable a critical understanding of main problems and evaluation of main political actors. Otherwise, any coherent understanding of democratic citizenship will be impossible (Davies 2003, 163-164). I have developed these concepts on the basis of institutional organization theory or organizational sociology. In difference to the traditional management and organization theories with their focus on separated concepts of individuals and organizational structures, the alternative approach focuses on individuals as social actors, defined by their social positions in organizations. This means that the concepts of social actors and structures are integrated. These concepts may be used also for political systems or the states. They enable to focus on the main problem: are the relations between main actors relevant for democracy? They may be used on organizational, local and national levels. In small organizations and communities, the answer may be found easily. On the national level, they may be used for an analysis of main political institutions like the Government and the Parliament. The dichotomy of agency and structure is central in sociology (Giddens 1984, Knuttila 1996, Leyder 1994), but not in political theories and democracy education. The latter rely often on rational actor theory. The paper will show that these concepts of social actors and structures are not used in European programs on democracy education, in international studies and in the system of civic education in Estonia. Critical analysis of traditional civic education has revealed that the traditional education rather supports status quo than a democratic deliberation. The paper will demonstrate that the present formal concepts of democracy education did not able to achieve its ideal goals in Estonia. They do not able to reveal autoritarian structures and oligarchic tendencies in society. The alternative social theoretical concepts have enabled me critical analyses of some public and educational organizations. They may be used for revealing authoritarian structures and their abuse of power. If a civic education system is willing to achieve its ideal goals, it would start to use them. So far, this did not happen. There is an unwillingness even to discuss the issues (Opetajate Leht - Estonian Teachers' Weekly, February 22, 2008).

The theoretical framework of civic education in Europe

Critical social scholars have revealed that traditional civics mainly describes some political institutions, avoids controversies, ignores hard social issues, and promotes obedience to laws and compliance to existing power structures (Davies 2003, 161, Ichilov 1998, 269-270, Ross 2001). It even does not help students in evaluation of programs and activities of political parties in case of elections. The traditional teaching combines information delivery with authoritarian relations between teachers and students (Ross 2001, Wilde 2004, 13). Many social scholars have concluded that such an education but contributes to reproduction of the existing social structures (Händle et al. 1999, Ichilev 1998, Naval et al. 2002, Ross 2000, Ross 2001, Suenker et al. 2003, Wilde, 2004, 8). Rienhold Hedtke, Thorsten Hippe and Tatjana Zimenkova (2007) propose a useful distinction beetween authoritarian and democratic civic education.

The European Council launched a programme on **Education for Democratic Citizenship**, based on the rights and responsibilities of (individual) citizens (EDC, 1997-2005). It defined basic concepts and core competences and distinguished the following dimensions of citizenship: political, legal, social, economic, cultural, European and global ones. Inside these dimensions, the main concepts were not outlined in detail. The project also defined the following core values: freedom, equality, participation, responsibility and solidarity (Audigier 1999, 19). The citizens should learn to be free, autonomous and creative, to think critically, be able to participate in teamwork, peaceful dialogue and negotiation. The minimal citizenship education focused on human rights, democracy and civil society. The maximal one implied also

active participation and skills to effect change. The political competences were considered as "weapons" to challenge any possible abuse of power by authorities (Audigier 1999, 11).

Council of Europe disseminated learning strategies (Duerr, Spajis-Vrkas, Martins 2000) and defined core concepts in more details. Democracy covers institutions and procedures, representative and participative democracy, democratic freedoms and principles (the rule of law, social justice, equality, pluralism, social cohesion, and inclusion, protection of minorities, solidarity, peace, stability and security) (Duerr, Spajis-Vrkas, Martins 2000, 60). Teachers should deal with controversial issues and challenge ambiguous and complex situations in the context of class or school (Duerr, Spajis-Vrkas, Martins 2000, 62) (but not in the context of local community and wider society). It was not clear, should the teachers critically analyze also possible mistakes and abuse of power by some authorities. As the concepts of democracy ignore social actors and structures, then they do not enable any generalizations.

Year 2005 was officially proclaimed the *European Year for Citizenship through Education*. Eurydice, the information network on education, analyzed how citizenship education is taught **at schools in Europe in 2004-2005** (Eurydice 2005). The review follows the ideology of the EDC. The main official aim of this education is to ensure that young people will become active and responsible citizens capable of contributing to the development and well-being of their societies. This education should guide pupils towards political literacy, critical thinking, development of democratic attitudes and values and active participation in the community at large (at international, national, local and school levels). The political literacy may involve learning about social, political and civic institutions, national constitutions, human rights, social issues and problems, history and cultural diversity (Eurydice 2005, 10). The review also mentions critical thinking, but does not say what it means.

The review analyzes pupil participation in schools, parental involvement and school participation in society. In Estonia, students may have their own unions or associations; they may elect their class representatives, members of student self-governance and their representatives to school council. The same opportunities have most European countries, but not all of them. In some European countries (France, Ireland, Portugal, United Kingdom), parents as members of their school councils may also participate in recruitment of teachers. In Estonia, as in most other countries, this is not the case. In Estonia as in many other countries, parents may have their say in election of facultative subjects, teaching methods, acquisition of textbooks, school plans and internal rules.

Eurydice also describes how the students' knowledge, attitudes and participation are assessed in these 30 countries. The review evaluates neither the level of political literacy nor the dominant attitudes and values. This means that most schools may teach passive and subordinated citizens, loyal to the existing political authorities and institutions.

A critical review of the EDC project argues that both the theoretical framework and existing civics curricula were inadequate for a democratic education (Naval, Print and Veldhuis 2002, 124). Another study on education for democratic citizenship also stresses the need for diversification (Birzea et al. 2004).

International studies on democracy knowledge in Estonia and other countries

International Association for Evaluation of Educational Achievements (IEA) has investigated **civic education** in a number of countries since 1971. In 1991, the IEA studied knowledge of content (25 units), interpretation skills (13 skills), 52 concepts, 62 attitudes and 22 actions. The investigation covered three domains:

 democracy (characteristics of democracy, democratic institutions and citizenship – rights and duties); national identity and international relations;

- social cohesion and diversity (Torney-Purta et al. 2001).

Students had to evaluate, what is good and what is bad for democracy. IEA did not study complex and controversial issues like the main problems in representative democracy. The scholars referred to many concepts of democracy (Held 1996, Dahl 1998), but they did not ask pupils to use the concepts for assessment of their democratic practices at schools, communities and societies. They distinguished between conventional and non-conventional citizenship, but not between authoritarian and democratic, or non-critical and critical ones.

In 1999, the survey covered nearly 90 thousand 14-year-old students in 28 countries. In Estonia, the sample included 3938 pupils from the grade 8. In 2000, the IEA covered 18 years old students, including 3215 students from grade 12 in Estonia. In 2005, Anu Toots arranged a follow-up study in Estonia (Toots et al. 2006). This time, 3099 students from the grade 8 (every 7th) and 2743 from grade 9 (every 8th) fulfilled the questionnaire.

The next investigation is planned for year 2009. Perhaps, this time they will study some more complicated issues like value orientations and knowledge of some social critical and controversial concepts.

In 1999, Estonian younger students lag behind the average of the 28 countries (94 from the average of 100 – Torney-Purta et al. 2001, 55, Malak-Minkiewicz 2007, 67). The follow-up study (2005) revealed improvements in the knowledge of the 14 year old pupils in Estonia in the last six years. The study also demonstrated the effectiveness of civics lessons in the 9th grade, as the investigation covered also students from this grade.

Critical civic education

Citizens should be able to make independent and critical decisions about abuse of power by authorities (Audigier 1999, 11, Cochran-Smith 2005, Ichilov 1998, 271, Puolimatka 1995, Turner 1997). Amy Gutman argues (1999, XIII) that "a necessary condition of an adequate civic education is to cultivate the skills and virtues of deliberative citizenship". Civic and social studies could and should contribute to social transformation (White 2003, 754). To do so, the syllabus should rely on social construction of knowledge, inquiry and problem based instruction, students' involvement in community development and multiple perspectives (Gloria Ladson-Billings in Ross, 2001). Danny Wildermeersch and others (2005) outline the CREDIS theoretical framework that combines critical and radical citizenship, multiple identities and institutional and social learning. This approach focuses on learning processes and does not develop the concepts of democracy.

Students and teachers should take part in decision making together, and critically analyze what happens when that knowledge is put into practice. They should critically analyze asymmetries in power and causes of social injustice (DeJaeghere and Tudball 2007). In sum, the critical civic education should aim at collective change.

Alternative system of concepts for the civic education

A deliberative civic education needs an adequate social theory. Many sociologists consider the relations between individuals and society, and social actors and structures as central in social theory (Giddens 1984, Knuttila 1996, Leyder 1994). The concepts are interrelated. The number of individuals and their interrelations is enormous. The numbers of social actors and their relations is very limited. Nevertheless, an analysis of their interrelations enables to understand main social problems in society. An ignorance of the social embeddedness of main political and other institutions enables to hide the main social contradictions. As a result, a deliberative education will be impossible.

What are the main actors and structures in economic, political and educational systems?

In economy, the main institutions are markets and firms. On the market, the main social actors are producers and consumers. In general, the actors are equal. In firm, there are owners, managers and employees. In general, the relations between the actors are hierarchical. Oliwer Williamson (1975 etc.) has demonstrated how these two main effective social institutions have institutionalized the rapid development of the capitalist market economy.

In politics, the main social actors are citizens as owners, politicians as representatives of the owners, administrators and civil servants. There are two main models of decision making: democratic elections and hierarchical power execution. These main models do not suffice. There are problems with effectiveness and justice (democracy deficit).

In education, the main social actors may be defined as students, their parents, teachers, school heads and material resource providers (the state and local communities). In schools, there are three main models of decision making: hierarchy, democracy (teachers' council and unions, students' self-governance) and partnership (school council).

These concepts can easily be linked to students democratic experiences at schools, as do many other European countries (Osler 2000, Print et al. 2002).

Table 1

Social subsystems	Owners	Administrators	Service providers	Clients
Economy	Shareholders	Managers	Employees	Consumers
Politics	(Citizens) and politicians	Administrators	Civil servants	People
Education	Material resource providers	School heads	Teachers	Students

Main actors in economy, politics and education

Source: Haav 2005a.

The relations between the actors are regulated by laws, organizational structures, contracts and moral norms in all social spheres. In general, these norms and regulations can be considered as social structures. These structures also determine social positions of various individuals. The concept of social actors characterizes the main differences between a number of individuals. The differences between individual organizational members are defined by main models of decision making. In case of the democratic model, all members are equal. In case of autocratic model, all individual members are unequal. The partnership model enables to combine equality and inequality. In an organization, the individual members are unequal. In the organizational governance, representatives of the main organizational stakeholders (social actors) are equal.

The concepts of social actors and structures are also linked to concepts of social values and outcomes. The hierarchical model favours individual prosperity and effectiveness for the leaders. It may also lead to social inequality and discrimination. The democratic model stresses equality and solidarity between all members. It may become ineffective. The partnership model enables to combine equality and inequality, effectiveness and justice. Different models of decision making may lead to different social outcomes (effectiveness, justice, discrimination, exploitation).

In this theoretical framework, society is not a collection of equal individuals, rather, it is a collection of unequal social actors. These actors have different rights, resources and opportunities, including the opportunities to use others for their own goals. More complex models of decision making like that of partnership may diminish the opportunities for social ineffectiveness, injustice and discrimination.

I have used this framework for empirical analyses of some public organizations (Haav, 2000-2004). The analysis has revealed that the main cause of their mulfunction is an unwillingness of administrators to improve. They stressed the importance of managerial hierarchies and ignored concepts of participative democracy and partnership. This enabled them to manipulate with others and hide their ineffectivenss and arbitrariness. The alternative concepts may be used to reveal any possible manipulation and diminish the abuse of power by some authorities. This is a goal of the deliberative education and also of the European democracy education (Audigier 1999, 11, Cochran-Smith 2005, Ichilov 1998, 271, Puolimatka 1995, Turner 1997). These concepts enable also a critical analysis of practice of democracy education in Estonia. Other writers on democracy education have not yet constructed any similar system of concepts of social actors and structures.

Since 2003, I have promoted the system of concepts to some national and international conferences (Haav 2003-2006) and also to main actors in the civic education system in Estonia (Anu Toots, author of many textbooks of civics, the Curriculum Development Centre at the University of Tartu, Sulev Valdmaa and the National Examination Centre). The latter accepted them in 2007, but at the moment, the curriculum development has been frozen by the new Minister of Education and Research.

Conventionalism in Estonian civic textbooks

The current **Estonian civic syllabus** (adopted in 2002) declares the same democratic ideals as the European democracy education does. It outlines an eclectic collection of main concepts and determines a number of ambiguous and unrealistic study outcomes. It does not prescribe how to define the main concepts.

The Minister of Education and Research has accepted the textbooks by Katrin Olenko and Anu Toots (2005) and Leili Möldre and Anu Toots (1999) as relevant for the civic studies and examinations in Estonia.

The books refer to a number of sources in Estonian and English, including a textbook on sociology (Hess, Markson and Stein 2000 in Estonian, 1993 in English). Unfortunately, the reference books are often ignored. The books describe the main political institutions and processes in technical details, but outside of real social relations. Even the main theoretical concepts like those of society, social structure and democracy are ambiguous and misleading.

The last book (2005) neither uses the definitions by Hess, Markson and Stein (1993 and 2000) nor refers to any other definitions in sociology or other social sciences. It just makes some voluntary statements like the following (2005, 29-30):

- 1. "Society is an ordered way of co-habitation of large masses of people".
- 2. "Public, private and non-profit sectors make up the structure of society".
- 3. "Society also consists of different individuals".
- 4. "Individual differences between people are the basis of social stratification".

These statements demonstrate an isolation of concepts of individuals (actors) and social structures, including the state. Social hierarchies are not linked to power structures as it is done in the Estonian textbook on legal studies (Kiris et al. 2007).

The individualist approach, that is dominant in psychology, fails to understand social institutions like the state, politics, economy, culture, language etc. The social institutions are explained as natural phenomena. According to social constructionism, they are constructed by people. Such dualist concepts enable to ignore social problems, social inequality, injustice and discrimination. They also hide the main social problems of democracy like that of possible abuse of power by authorities.

Abraham Lincoln defined democracy as government of the people by the people and for the people. This statement includes all main necessary concepts: people, government, system of elections, system of governance and criterion for assessment of the governance. Olenko and Toots refer to the Lincoln (2005, 61), but fail to develop and use his ideas.

The textbook discusses opportunities for democracy and concludes the following.

"Only if all people accept democracy, act according to its norms and believe that also their partners and even opponents behave in the same way, only then is the democratic order firmly established in the society" (Olenko and Toots 2005, 21).

Although Estonian students have similar opportunities for democratic practices as do their counterparts in other European countries, the textbooks do not link these practices and to concepts of democracy. They mention human rights, but fail to discuss problems of students' values. They discuss some problems of transition to democracy, but not in Estonia or other post-totalitarian countries. They do not approach the totalitarian past critically.

In sum, the textbooks are collections of arbitrary theoretical concepts and technical descriptions of formal political institutions. They enable a classification of students on the basis of their formal knowledge. The books do not assist students in challenging possible abuse of power by some authorities. The role of civic education in development of students' democratic knowledge and skills is modest. Its role in value formation is practically missing (Kalmus 2003).

As the dominant model of teaching is that of knowledge delivery and the dominant model of teacher-student relations is the authoritarian one, then the education in general and the civic education in particular participate in promotion of authoritarian values and relations (Haav 2005b). In schools with Russian instruction, the authoritarian Estonian civic education strengthens the authoritarian national attitudes of Russian students. As a result, it counteracts to the national integration of Russian students with the Estonian state.

National examinations in civics in Estonia

The national examinations do not evaluate achievement of the goals of civic syllabus. They just assess the percentage of students' knowledge and skills. In the last five years, the average percentage has been between 55 and 59 (out of possible 100). They neither measure the knowledge nor understanding of some main concepts of democracy. Student also don't demonstrate their skills to implement the main concepts in description and analysis of their democratic practices.

It is hard to measure the knowledge and the skills of their implementation, because the official textbooks are inadequate in this sense. In the last methodic Recommendations for students (Valdmaa 2008), a lack of clear concepts is considered as a peculiarity of the subject itself! The Recommendations itself define society after the popular Estonian Encyclopedia (vol. 10, 1998, 634) and not after the official textbook (Olenko and Toots 2005, 29). Society is both a form of co-habitation and collection of social relations and institutions (Valdmaa 2008, 14).

The civics examinations itself started in the school year 2001-2002. The examination is mandatory and mainly those intending to enter a university take this. The number of students taking this examination has increased from 995 in 2002 to 5287 (about half) in 2007. The examination is prepared by a commission, consisting usually out of 6 university teachers, 6 civic teachers and 3 administrators. During the examination, students are allowed to use only the Constitution, not the textbook or other materials. In the last years, the examination has consisted of two parts. First, an essay (1-2 pages) enabling to collect up to 20 points or 20 per cent of results. Usually, students could select one of the six topics. In 2006, the students could discuss problems of the Internet, privacy, fiscal policy, active citizens, globalization and social sustainability.

The evaluators assessed the structure, problem settings, personal opinions, conclusions, style and ortography in the essays. They did not evaluate how students used the textbook theories for analyzing their practices.

The second part focuses on various excercises on all six chapters of the syllabus and the Constitution. In 2006, some new parts about social policy, sustainable development and political parties were added. Four sets of questions (up to 40 points out of 100) concerned democracy and political literacy, we outline them in details. One block of questions (up to 10 points) concerned the presidential elections: factual knowledge about the requirements for candidates, the members of the elective body, rights and obligations of the president and opinion about the need for direct elections (the elections will be this year). The other (5 opinions with argumentations, up to 10 points) concerned political parties. There was necessary to recognize a social democratic party after their program, discuss the role of ideology for parties and the increasing integration of ideologies, express one's preference of a one-party or multi-party government and for a need for legal regulation of political parties. Third set of questions (5, up to 10 points) was related to the contemporary society. How did Estonia manage its transition so far? How to distinguish between organizations of the first, second and third sector? Which opportunities have the NGO's to influence the national policy? What is the concept of pluralism? Three of the questions needed factual knowledge and two of them some argumentation skills. The last chapter was about Constitution and concerned citizens' rights.

The questions require mainly factual textbook knowledge and general argumentation skills. These knowledge and skills are assessed by quantitative marks. The essays demonstrate the students' capabilities of self-expression. They do not evaluate knowledge of theories and skills of their implementation in practice. This is not sufficient for an evaluation of the level of students' democratic knowledge and skills.

Conclusions

The paper analyzed problems in civic education and focused on development of a coherent system of concepts for democracy. The alternative system is hierarchical and relies on the main social dichotomy – that of social actors and structures. It defines main actors and models of decision making in economy, politics and education. This system enables to focus on the main problem: are the relations between social actors and structures relevant for democracy?

The paper analyzed the civic education system in Estonia (syllabus, textbooks and national examinations). The Estonian civic education can be characterized as a typical authoritarian system. Somebody has the authority to set the goals (syllabus), somebody – to outline a collection of texts, somebody – to deliver the texts to students, and somebody – to measure the percentage of how much students have memorized these texts. Formally, everybody is invited to participate in curriculum development and make their proposals. Actually, the development does not rely on scientific principles, it relies on political and administrative models of decision making. This enables political manipulations. Some argue that curriculum development is impossible in principle and nobody is interested in it in Estonia.

Majority of teachers consider education as delivery of knowledge (texts)(Haav 2005b). They are prepared neither for development of students' conceptual thinking, not their social and emotional skills. The national examination centre relies on these teachers and the dominant school practice. They are resistant to contemporary social and educational theories. The Centre has actually most important role in development of civic education. They design, analyze and evaluate the examinations. They mainly assess the precentage of acquisation of texts by students. To some extent, they also evaluate students' common argumentation skills.

None of these authorities is interested in serious changes, in introduction of a deliberative civic education. It should be stressed that all these authorities are inside

the education system. It may be concluded that a deliberative civic education is not possible without radical change in the authoritarian education system itself.

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