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“Shut Up When You Talk with Me”: Civil Education in a Post-Communist Society Challenged by the Institutionalized Public Culture. The Case of Bulgaria

Abstract

The paper provides a concise overview of the state of arts of civil education in Bulgaria giving proofs that the contents and values of CE basically contradict the fundamental cultural pattern which is embedded in the institutional design of the school system and the policies of the Ministry of Education. There is a tremendous tension between critical and hypocritical education in democracy. The discrepancy between public “talk” and institutional “action” in civil education is more than overt. This is why the more we concentrate our attention on texts (textbooks, expert publications, manuals for teachers, etc.) the higher level of advancement of CE we will encounter and vice versa – the more we study the school life as practice the less traits of civil culture we register. Hence, the main conclusion is that civil education cannot substitute or get ahead of the democratic institution building; both processes should develop in accord with each other. Or they both would turn out to be abortive.

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Keywords

Civil education, civil culture, post-communist society, school practices, democratic institution building

“Picture an authoritarian classroom environment where an inquisitorial teacher lectures to silent, passive, and obedient students about the virtues of their new-found civic duty to participate in open public debate and shape the course of civic life. When responding to the questions put to them by the teacher, students are required to jump to attention from their desks that are nailed down in orderly rows. The teacher then responds only by correcting any minute detail the student may have overlooked or stated incorrectly. No questions from the students are entertained, and no one is encouraged to question evidence or examine the issues. Nothing resembling a discussion or debate takes place. If this sounds like a caricature, we have seen it in classrooms in central and Eastern Europe held up to us as models of openness and innovation.”

(Brophy, Temple, Meredith 2004, 38)

The picture described by the three participants in the *Reading and Writing for Critical Thinking Project*, a multinational school reform program that has been implemented in 28 nations few years ago, is still valid – at least in Bulgaria. In our case we encounter a tremendous tension between *critical* and *hypocritical* education in democracy. The discrepancy between public “talk” and institutional “action” in civil education is more than overt. The closer we stay to the pole of expert discourse about civil education, the better we understand its specificity. Moving to the opposite pole – the one of institutionally implemented public culture – we see less and less traits of democracy. The State Standards of civil education are ambiguous; the textbooks’ contents which should embody these standards are even less conducive to the creation of democratic mentality; the classroom practice actually provides no room for the formation of civil attitudes and the practice of school life in general even less; and the relationship between the national Ministry of Education and Science and the stake-holders in education is explicitly authoritarian. No one, of course, would venture to defend authoritarian values in open debate, but authoritarianism is manifested in the mundane operation of public (and education) institutions.

For the purpose of our case study we have carried out a desk research, an analysis of normative documents and a dozen of interviews with ex-ministers, NGO experts and journalists. Here are our major findings:

1. The Bulgarian Civil Education Can Be Described as Ambivalent

1.1. Some Real Achievements

On the one hand, there are some very positive trends and accomplishments:

- Civil education (and education for democratic citizenship) has been introduced in school curricula in various forms and has undoubted public legitimacy¹⁷;
- Proponents of civil education know very well its goals, its thematic and value specificity as well as methodological requirements (Andonov; Makariav 1996; Valchev 1999; Dishkova, Kazakov 2006; Rizova, Rizov 2000);
- MES has adopted the so-called “State Requirements for Education in Civil Education”, and curricula standards are defined respectively¹⁸ in all teaching subjects concerned;

¹⁷ In normative documents adopted by the Ministry of Education in 1999, CE is set up as one of the prior cultural and education fields for children from the 1st to 12th grade of the general education preparation. This finds expression in a new curriculum implemented with Ordinance # 4 from September 2nd, 1999. There is an education field called "Social sciences and civil education" exists. It includes the following basic subjects: homeland lessons; human being and society; history and civilization; geography and economy; psychology and logics; ethics and law; philosophy; human being and the world. Issues related to democracy, human rights, peace culture and intercultural dialogue are a central part of the Bulgarian curriculum structure for civil education. In Ordinance # 2 from 18th May 2000, State Education Requirements (standards) for social sciences and civil education (content, aims, and approaches) were approved. In the accepted documents both general characteristics of civil education (content, aims, approaches) and concrete requirements towards civil education in general compulsory school education are included. In its essence these requirements (standards) are statements describing learning, skills and relations that are the core of civic knowledge and which students have to gain as a result of compulsory school preparation. (Kolarova 2002, p. 5-6)

¹⁸ Again quote: “According to the state education requirements (standards) the training in civil education aims to develop and create a young person who:

- Is an independent and free thinker, able to assume responsibilities for himself / herself and for others;
- Knows and stands up for his / her rights, freedoms and responsibilities;
- Is aware of his / her spiritual harmony with the Bulgarian nation and the other European nations as well;
- Has an appropriate attitude toward the state and society;
- Masters mechanisms for constructive social participation and change;

The State Education Requirements describe the most important learning, skills and attitudes that the children could and should have to receive as a result of their training within the bounds of the general

- There is an institutional mechanism for teachers' retraining for teaching civil education based on various NGO programs and several specialized university centers for teachers' retraining (in-service training);
- There are text-books and the actual teaching process is being carried on (at least in the form of subjects that pertain to civil education);
- There are books and articles which could be used for the purpose of civil education¹⁹;
- There is at least a dozen of influential local NGOs which have fulfilled numerous projects in the field in cooperation with the Bulgarian MES as their permanent partner (most prominent among them are "Foundation Partners, Bulgaria", Foundation "Paidea", Open Education Center, etc.);
- Some special attention is paid to minority and multicultural issues;
- In accordance with Article 12 of "the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child", student councils are established in all schools that are the institutional premise for practicing student rights at school;
- In many schools a project culture is taking root that is not only focused on school activities (both in-class and extra-class) but on public and/or municipality issues.

To sum up, *civil education as a concept and as expert discourse is relatively well-established and is actually doing well*. Everything mentioned above is really very important and the progress should not be underestimated, having in mind the basic lack of any tradition in civil education in the country. At the same time, on the other hand, if we consider the facts more carefully – not so much from the point of view of quantitative innovations but from the one of qualitative change – we will find a substantially different picture.

1.2. Some Major Misfortunes

The details are not difficult to imagine:

- Civil education is overwhelmingly unpopular²⁰;

compulsory preparation when finishing certain education level or stage. For example, in primary school (grade 4) the pupil has to:

- Know the equal worth of every human being;
- Be able to stand up for his / her rights, without breaking others' rights;
- Know how to resolve conflicts;

In secondary school (grades 7 - 8) the State Education Requirements demand that the children have to:

- Specify the term "state";
- Draw conclusions about the contemporary tendencies in global economy;
- Discern ethnical from religious and from language belonging;
- Know the role of cooperation among the nations for globalization;

In secondary school (grade 12) the children have to:

- Study the origin and the development of the idea of democracy;
- Expound the mechanisms of power;
- Know and take part in the forms of civil control of state institutions;
- Analyze the development of the idea of civil society;
- Know the international records for human rights;
- Know the idea of "citizen of the world"

The accepted State Education Requirements suit the contemporary understanding of education for democratic citizenship and give a clear direction of how the expected results in that particular field of the Bulgarian education system have to look like." (Kolarova 2002, p. 6)

¹⁹ Here are some representative examples: Balkanski, Zahariev 1998, Bulgaria in the United Europe: Manual for the Future European Citizens. 2005, Valova 1991, Valchev 1998, Valchev 1999, Valchev 2005a; Valchev 2005b, Valchev 2005c, Gavrilova, Elenkov 1998, UNDP 2001, Dainov 2001, Dishkova, Kazakov 2006.

²⁰ A former Deputy Minister boasts that he abolished the mature-exam in civil education, provisioned by a special Law because the devastating failure of the majority of the students was too easy to foresee, which would have discredited the very idea of such education. Even experts from the NGO most active in introducing civil education admit that it is a "discourse on paper only".

- The State requirements actually have only oblique relevance to *civil culture*²¹; they emphasize fixed knowledge and not the acquisition of competencies²² and, even worse, protection of children`s rights is only paid lip service to;
- There is not a single university that offers a course on civil education to future school teachers, using the excuse that as far as there is no such separate course in the curricula no special training is needed, i. e. under the pretext that this should be the basic task of all instructors, it is actually done by nobody. The real reason is that introducing an authentic civil dimension in education would require a *fundamental restructuring of the entire pedagogical pattern*, i.e such an innovation could not be limited to a change in the contents only but should evolve into a systematic education reform²³;
- Civil education has been practically enacted only two years ago, and it is too early to evaluate its overall effects;
- Literature on civil education is comparatively scarce, is sometimes written by marginal authors (Balkanski; Zahariev 1998; Zahariev & Co 2001) and has limited applicability in the teaching process. (It predominantly introduces concepts and explanations but very rarely is usable as a manual such as Dishkova ; Kazakov 2006);
- NGOs act predominantly in the framework of foreign donator programs, but not under a permanent MES program²⁴ (see Valchev 2005b);
- The young personality as a citizen is absent from school practices²⁵, and the student councils are usually only formal but not real defenders of rights.

To sum up, *up-to date civil education has barely gone beyond the field of discourse and even within it there are reasons for serious concerns*. The Bulgarian case is an ample proof of the validity of the general three-fold hypothesis that "First, concepts of citizenship as expressed in curricula (Action) may more or less subtly diverge from concepts of official citizenship promulgated in the political discourse (Talk). Second, concepts of citizenship as expressed in textbooks or furthered in teachers` education may not be in line with those prescribed in curricula. Third, even if official concepts of

²¹ Civil education does not exist in the form of a single subject but only in the form of a civic dimension of other traditional subjects such as literature, history, geography, philosophy, etc. which are taught in the traditional manner outlined in the opening quotation.

²² "Even where it has been introduced civil education sounds traditional. It is more a theory and has been treated with obsolete methods of teaching rather than a dialogue based on interactive methods. There is no link between civil education in the class room and the social life and practices of the young people." See Valchev 2005b

²³ Besides, it is quite easy to comprehend that the longer civil education is not incorporated in the standard education of future teachers, the longer the necessity to re-train these teachers will persist (on the foreign donators' grants). This is the notorious "trained incapacity" of NGOs to achieve their project goals – especially in the sector of Roma programs.

²⁴ This happens to be the general pattern in practically all post-communist societies (see the national case-studies presented at the conference *Transformed institutions – transformed civil education?*, Bielefeld, June 8-10, 2007.

²⁵ For more details see the magnificent analysis of the tacit socialization program in all textbooks of Bulgarian language and Literature carried out by Adriana Damyanova (Damyanova: 2007). The author provides eloquent and abundant evidence that proves the conclusions:

"... the Knowledge but not the Subject of activity takes place – both literary and figuratively – as paramount in the value center of the curricula in Bulgarian Language and Literature..." (ib., 9)

"... the analyzed documents do not meet the requirement of a balanced and non-discrepant interlocking between knowledge and skills (knowledge about and know-how) in order to fulfill the implicit anticipation, the State Standards and the curricula and thus to provide the Bulgarian students with the ability to conceive, to comprehend and understand and, as well, (re)act upon the world which they inhabit."(ib.,52)

citizenship education as expressed in curricula and textbooks may be coherent, they may be eventually (informally) impeded or subverted.”²⁶ These findings make it necessary to look more carefully at the problems of civil education.

2. Basic Problems of Civil Education in a Post-Communist Country

There are two kinds of problems:

2.1 Problems of Contents:

- Strangely enough the basic idea is “labor” (the relationship between man and nature), but not “public interests” (the relationships among citizens in society). This is strange from a democratic or civil point of view but is only logical in a country where vulgar Marxism has been the dominant worldview for the last half of the century (or at least for the individuals in academia who now write the state requirements);
- The citizen is defined as a loyal subject of the state only, but not as a holder of public stances in a competitive environment. (Actually it is exactly *the society as contested polity* that has been totally replaced by the state and, hence, the public sphere as practices, structures and values – is altogether absent)²⁷;
- The supremacy of the state over the person is envisaged to be introduced very early in one’s childhood before the child can develop an understanding of personal dignity, morals, interests, community and society. Practical skills for self- and group-defense (of interests or dignity) are omitted altogether (see Damyanova 2007);
- There is a lot of space in the curricula for history, geography and even law but no space for sociology at all. This is not just a mere coincidence – there cannot be any space for sociology in a concept of citizenship dominated that emphasizes the ‘entity of people’. In such a case sociology would have introduced ‘cognitive dissonance’ emphasizing the diversity of social life and the contest of interests, the quest for power and the ideological distortions of group and class worldviews;
- The status of citizenship at best is defined by universal personal rights and some general obligations, but not through *personal responsibilities* in the process of defending *particular public stakes*.

All the points listed above are not an arbitrary sum of ad hoc faults or a casual shortcoming of an underdeveloped teaching experience. On the contrary, all these are manifestations of a general pattern of education which has been quite consistent with the previous social system based on obedience to the centralized command-administrative, authoritarian one-party rule.

2.2 Paradigm Problems:

- Civil education in Bulgaria is performed mainly *as an aspect of general education* (in literature, history, geography, philosophy, etc.) yet, not being capable of humanizing and civilizing their spirit and socialization practices in all classroom

²⁶ Reinhold Hedtke, Thorsten Hippe, Dr. Tatjana Zimenkova (2007)

²⁷ At the end of their primary school education the Bulgarian children sat the external national evaluation exam in “Man and Society” for the first time this year in May. The multiple choice test was comprised of twenty questions – nine of them concerned history, seven – geography; three referred to *the regalia* of statehood. The present day social life was addressed by only one question: “Who rules at school?” - the three answers being: a) the board of trustees b) the pedagogical council c) the headmaster. As you can rightly guess the one and only correct answer is – the Headmaster.

activities, the project of personal development of students has been degraded to memorizing ready made knowledge. Facing the hard realities of school life as an institutional pattern, *subdued to the norms of centralized administration and to the authority of authoritarian 'Truth', civil education has been degraded to the recitation of definitions* of "civil society", "rights", "institutions for the protection of children rights", and even "debate" that actually never happens. In general *teaching is knowledge-centered and not student-centered*;

- Teaching civil education is practiced as a purely cognitive process and not as a practical acquisition of skills or competencies for civil activities. This is done not deliberately but exactly as a consequence of a knowledge-centered and deprived of activism socialization pattern imbedded in State standards and textbooks (as well as in the teachers' expectations of students' achievements deriving from the former);
- Civil society is itself understood in normative terms only but not in terms of personal activities, i. e. students are expected to know how it is legally defined and not how we/they can shape it;
- At best civil society is seen as an ideal (and abstract) sole protector of the individual and *not as a partner* in conducting to *particular public policies*;

3. Socio-Historical Origins of the Problems

Firstly, it should be clear that the handicaps of the Bulgarian civil education derive mainly from the way it has been produced:

- MES works in institutional isolation with arbitrary teams without any public visibility and, hence, sometimes the team-members happen to be the product of a narrow disciplinary socialization (history, geography) and/or ideological indoctrination (vulgar Marxism);
- In a post-communist society we lack a public debate on the concept, values and methods, i. e. on the goals and means of education in general which is the standard practice of our MES policy. It is only quite logical that in such an institutional setting the public interests of citizenship fall victim to the corporative interests of the institutions performing the policies. The authoritarian institutional inertia successfully counteracts innovations. This tradition has been merely reproduced in the case of civil education – the contents of civil education fundamentally contradict the institutional design of the state apparatus and, hence, we encounter silent and yet powerful resistance against any practice of democratic citizenship at school. The most successful resistance takes the form of a transformation of civil culture as public practice into a purely cognitive process of the acquisition of abstract information (this way oriented towards loyalty to the State as the sole embodiment of national unity). Thus the actual result is alienation from civil education and civic responsibilities among young people;
- The local (Bulgarian) civil society is not a referent of our civil education – it is omitted as an empirical evidence in the education process (as examples of good practices), and as a procedure both in the process of creation of the concept (as public dialogue) and in school practice. (This is why quite often the contribution of the NGOs is subdued to the priorities of foreign donators, for example, Roma integration); Worst of all, the culture of civil society drastically contradicts the disciplinary practices and power relationships in school life as an integral pattern inherited from the past²⁸, and this is why it cannot be implemented as a practice of

²⁸ It is a well established fact the tendency towards State-centralism was full-flagged already in the 1930s and the imposition of the communist party rule just enhanced the trend towards the state's omnipotence against the civil society.

personal development of students in particular class activities. Introducing authentic civil education especially in the form of learning by doing would definitely improve school as an institution integrated in the state apparatus (see Dimitrov 2004).

4. Tasks for Enhancing Civil Education in a Post-Communist Country

This is how we arrive at our basic conclusion: The present state of affairs in our civil education reflects the historical stage of an underdeveloped civil society in the country *as a structure and as a mentality*. Although it has already gained legitimacy and expanding presence in school life (in the form of the teaching process predominantly), *it has not yet become an effective instrument for the enhancement of a civic consciousness and the strengthening of civil society*. At present it is more a product and a manifestation of the current state of the national civil society, which has a very little say in public policies (the education policy as one of many). This seems to be the general pattern in all post-communist countries or, at least, in countries as different as Russia, Romania, Croatia, Bulgaria, Estonia. Such a pattern of civil education cannot contribute to fostering the sustainable development of civil culture.

This is why our civil education, taking advantage of the achievements already available, should be redesigned first in terms of contents, values, principles and practices before trying to disseminate it broadly. In this sense the current relative backwardness is not an obstacle but, paradoxically, is the advantage needed for further development. But it is obvious that the success of the change in civil education depends on two premises:

- a. it cannot be effective without *a large scale democratization reform of the education system*,
i.e. civil education can only be a caricature in an authoritarian institutional setting²⁹;
- b. in the post-communist societies we need *a re-design of the public institutions, which should be made responsive to and in cooperation with civil society*; they themselves should become embodiments of civic culture because otherwise civil education is doomed to remain abstract and self-contradicting.

Of course, everything said above is just a general conceptual description that needs further detailization and careful empirical texting. Further research is requested in order to provide comprehensive answers to such questions as:

- To what extent is the normative framework responsible for the perpetuation of the authoritarian school practices?
- How can the socialization pattern of future teachers be changed in order to make them engaged in education for democratic citizenship?
- Are there, at present, supporters of/stakeholders in civil education both within and outside the school?

²⁹“We should not forget that our social reality is not auspicious for the strengthening of the ideas and principles of civil education. It repudiates the majority of principles which the civil education (or the education for democratic citizenship) tries to support [...] [...]What positively influences on the education system is connected with the establishment of a formal democratic order, with democratic influences from abroad, and with the gradual (step-by-step) dissemination of the elements of a democratic culture in the sphere of education. [...]The most important in this case is the growth of civil society and, respectively, of civil society in the sphere of education.” See Valchev 2005b

- What should be changed in the class-room action in order to make it citizen-building?

Yet, even now we can be quite sure in our basic assertion: Civil education cannot substitute or get ahead of the democratic institution building; both processes should develop in accord with each other. Or they both would turn out to be abortive.

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