

MAIN CURRENT PROBLEMS OF EDUCATION FOR DEMOCRATIC CITIZENSHIP IN TWO EU COUNTRIES – THE NETHERLANDS AND BULGARIA

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Abstract. This publication is a result of the joint work of an Erasmus student from the Netherlands and a lecturer at Sofia University in Bulgaria as a host country. The present article investigates the main current problems of education for democratic citizenship (EDC) in two EU countries – The Netherlands and Bulgaria, from the point of view of: 1. the brief background of the tradition of democracy, constitutionalism and democratic citizenship in the two EU countries; 2. the structure of EDC in formal education, the most significant studies and the main requirements of the current legislation in each of two countries of EU. These points of view created the general framework for interpreting the state of the EDC in two countries. The summary from this research can be made that despite the different historical past and the different degree of democratization of the different national communities, today the two EU countries have similar goals and take similar state actions through the legislation for the development of the educational systems towards the sustainability of democratic values for civil society and the rule of law.

Keywords: education for democratic citizenship (EDC); formal education; studies; democracy; constitutionalism

Introduction

Driven by the understanding that Education for democratic citizenship (EDC) can support the development of democratic processes in any country, we, as the authors of the article, are an Erasmus student and a teacher from an Erasmus host country. We decided to make this joint international publication, because we think alike about current problems of education for democratic citizenship in **two** EU countries – The Netherlands and Bulgaria, although we decided to write this article at the time The Netherlands announced that it would veto Bulgaria's entry into the EU Schengen area.

The expectation for the 21st century was that it would be the best time for humanity, but it turned out that in parallel with new technologies and aspirations for an ecological planet, there are also problems that were considered to have been solved by humans a long time ago - pandemic, war in the continent of Europe, propaganda, refugees etc. Old problems of the planet remained unsolved - poverty and hunger, economic problems, migration etc. New problems typical of the 21st century have also appeared – fake news, hybrid warfare, human trafficking, terrorism etc. It seems that humanity quickly forgets, but it is not able to quickly solve its problems.

Also, they say that today liberal democracy is in crisis.

Issues such as these raise questions about the current relevance of Education for democratic citizenship (EDC) in the process of developing democracy and citizenship and highlight the importance of an unchanging civic foundation for the democratic state. The provision of appropriate education for democratic citizenship in the countries of the democratic world, and especially in unions such as the EU, can contribute to the young generation and society as a whole to have a chance realizing the need democracy to be protect. The educational system of each country has made constant efforts to preserving the achievements of previous generations for the consolidation and development of modern democracy. The human history confirms that it is necessary that each succeeding generation must be socialized – to be taught to understand the depth of actual problems and not to forget the lessons of the past.

The concept of “Education for democratic citizenship” (EDC) is an umbrella term for the numerous learning processes in society that together are supposed to form the democratic education of all citizens. This naturally includes parts of formal education, especially in primary and secondary school. Accordingly, EDC is expected to take place primarily in the education system and is primarily intended for students and young people. However, there are many institutions and situations outside of formal education that play a role in EDC not only for children, but also for adults.

Actually, the concept of “Education for democratic citizenship” (EDC) is a term of the Council of Europe, which has been systematically and consistently defended over the years in the education policies of the organization.

The Council of Europe adopted the Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education (CEDCHRE) in 2010 with the Recommendation CM/Rec (2010)7 of the Committee of Ministers to member states on the Council of Europe. This document provides a clear definition of the term “Education for democratic citizenship” (EDC), as follows: *“education, training, awareness raising, information, practices and activities which aim, by equipping learners with knowledge, skills and understanding and developing their attitudes and behaviour; to empower them to exercise and defend their democratic rights and responsibilities in society, to value diversity and to play an active part in democratic life, with a view to the promotion and protection of democracy and the rule of law”*¹.

The term “Education for democratic citizenship” (EDC) in Bulgaria is synonymous with the concept “Civic education”, because of the national educational tradition – in Bulgaria it was used even in 1894. After the democratization of the country after 1989, it was decided to preserve the national tradition and to use the term established before the communist period of Bulgaria.

1. Brief background of the tradition of democracy and constitutionalism in two EU countries

1.1. Brief background of the tradition of democracy and constitutionalism in the Netherlands

The Netherlands is a country in EU with a long tradition of democracy and constitutionalism.

The Netherlands has been a parliamentary democracy since the 19th century: the Constitutional Reform of 1848 laid the groundwork for the democracy as it is today. However, the country also holds an important tradition of constitutionalism that goes even further back, to the 16th century. In 1581 the Dutch provinces presented the Spanish king Philip II, who ruled over them, with a document in which they declared independence. The document – the “Act of Abjuration” – holds large historical significance; it preceded the Enlightenment, when notions of constitutionalism and a “social contract” between state and sovereign were more firmly established by philosophers such as Rousseau (Israel 2011, p. 338). Moreover, the Act is considered to be the inspiration for the American Declaration of Independence, which was written nearly two hundred years later and follows a very similar structure (Wolff 1998).

In more recent history, The Netherlands has proven its liberal democratic tradition through involvement in the European community from the very beginning, being one of the 5 original states that signed the Treaty of Brussels in 1948 for the establishment of the Western Union and one of the founders of the European Coal and Steel Community. Since that time, the Netherlands has been a beacon of peace and liberal democracy and an example for many states (De Jong 2020, p. 5; Segers 2020, pp. 7 – 11).

As De Jong points out, in the past decade there has been growing consensus on the idea that liberal democracy in Europe is in crisis (De Jong 2020, pp. 1 – 3; Segers 2020, p. 301). The sense of alarm that comes with this observation proves just how important the (former) established position of democracy is as a foundation for societies such as the Netherlands (2020).

However, a long history of democracy and strong constitutional tradition are no guarantee that a state’s education for democratic citizenship is sufficient. In recent years research has established that Dutch youth are less educated on citizenship and democracy than a couple years before and there have been calls for improvement from inside the country (Schulz et al. 2016, pp. 3 – 5; Munniksmä 2017, pp. 11 – 16; VO-Raad, 2017).

1.2. Brief background of the tradition of democracy and constitutionalism in Bulgaria

Bulgaria is a country in EU with a not particularly rich tradition of democracy and constitutionalism.

Bulgaria had a different historical fate – Bulgaria had a glorious Middle Ages (7th – 14th century), but in 1396 it fell under Turkish slavery and the Bulgarians lost their statehood for five centuries – until 1878.

So, in the 19th century Bulgarian people fought for liberation from Turkish slavery and organized the April Uprising that ended unsuccessfully, with massacres and bloodshed. Two years later, after a heavy war, in 1878 Bulgaria was freed from Turkish slavery by Russia and restored as a state.

One year later, in 1879 the first Bulgarian constitution was adopted – the Tarnovo constitution. According to it, Bulgaria was a constitutional monarchy rather than a parliamentary monarchy. Moreover, the constitution has been repeatedly violated by the monarchs of Bulgaria – it has been suspended formally and factually and in reality there was no separation of powers.

Having survived numerous wars (Serbian-Bulgarian, Balkan, Inter-Allied, First World War and World War II) and 2 national catastrophes (1885 – 1944), after World War II Bulgaria chose a republican path of development, but fell under the influence of the USSR.

During the “socialist” period (1944 – 1989) Bulgaria had two new constitutions that affirmed socialism, totalitarianism and authoritarianism in the country.

From this absolutely brief overview, it can be seen that Bulgaria and Bulgarian society do not have a historical chance to develop democratically and build democratic values.

Only after the end of the Cold War, Bulgaria embarked on the path of democratic and constitutional development of the country with the implementation of democratic change in the state in 1989 and the adoption of the fourth Bulgarian constitution in 1991.

Bulgarian society makes a lot of efforts to defend and develop modern democracy in the country and Bulgaria has joined the EU in 2007.

Actually, Bulgaria is a younger democracy and still in an earlier stage of development of democracy and constitutionalism.

2. Structure of EDC in formal education, the most significant studies and current legislation in two countries of EU

2.1. Structure of EDC in formal education, the most significant studies and current legislation in the Netherlands

If we should done an overview of the structure of EDC in the Netherlands within modern *formal education*, it should be noted that since 2006, it has been obligatory

for schools to integrate EDC in their curricula²). Until recently, the law simply stated that citizenship education is supposed to encourage active citizenship and promote social cohesion²). Although hard knowledge about democracy, politics, and the rule of law is not generally a priority in the first years of formal education, the foundation for EDC is nevertheless laid in primary school^{1,3}. This process is not so much about teaching knowledge, as it is about the socialisation of children. At a young age, the focus is on social and emotional development of the child, rather than complex societal or political issues. In short, primary schools mostly cater to the civil aspects of citizenship: learning to function and communicate within a group, ergo within society. Another important role the primary school has to fulfill, is to integrate aspects of a democracy in the school. After all, for most children it is one of the first experiences of a community with rules and values. Until recently, there were no further guidelines or conditions put forward for creating such an environment. Outside of this framework – and the foundation of the constitution – schools were free to develop their EDC as they see fit⁴).

Education for democracy and citizenship becomes more theoretical and thorough in secondary school⁵). The socialisation process continues, while EDC is also implemented in classes all throughout secondary school. In the first three years it is called “maatschappijleer” or “burgerschap” (“society studies” or “citizenship”) – usually a compulsory subject. It teaches hard knowledge about the workings of the state, political systems, the foundations of the constitution, et cetera, as well as civil skills. This subject should give students a better sense of the system in which they live and will soon participate. In the last three years of school the optional subject of “maatschappijwetenschappen” (“society sciences”) is usually offered. EDC may, however, also be implemented in other existing classes. The law only obliges schools to teach citizenship and does not prescribe the form. In the third year of secondary school, schools may oblige students to follow a social internship at a place of their choice, which in practice constitutes voluntary work. This internship was obligatory in all schools until 2014. I personally carried out my internship at the local library, sorting and stacking books. The internship usually lasts several weeks and its aim is to let teenage students experience working within society (Eidhof et al. 2020, pp. 13 – 14; Munniksmä et al. 2017, pp. 14 – 15).

Despite this foundation, there have been concerns in the past decade about the state of EDC in the Netherlands and democratic awareness of Dutch teenagers. In 2016, a study was published by the *International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement* (IEA) called the *International Civic and Citizenship Education Study* (ICCS). It was a follow-up research to multiple similar studies in 1971, 1999, and 2009, that focused on civic and citizenship skills of second-year students in secondary school⁶) in different countries across the globe. The recurring and international nature of the research makes it possible to monitor one country’s

results over the years, as well as compare results of different countries. The results of teenagers in the Netherlands showed room for improvement:

First of all, knowledge about civic and societal issues was not at the desirable level; one third of students knew relatively much, but one third of students had a (very) low level of knowledge. The average level was lower than in comparable countries that took part in the research. Moreover, less than half of the students said they gain information about societal and political issues through media such as the newspaper or the news on television.

Furthermore, it was observed that political and societal participation among Dutch teenagers is relatively low: only one fifth of students takes part in campaigns for certain issues or volunteer initiatives. The Dutch participants also found aspects of citizenship much less important than their international peers; as an exception, they highly regarded freedom of speech. At the same time, a relatively high level of trust in social and state institutes was found, but not for traditional media. 7 out of 10 students expected they will be voting in elections as adults (Munniksma 2017, pp. 25 – 31).

The study also inquired teachers about their teaching skills in the field of EDC. The confidence Dutch teachers had in their own competencies was significantly lower than the international average. They mostly reported that it was more difficult for them to educate students on theoretical knowledge about citizenship and the state, than to teach skills such as critical and autonomous thinking. Some felt that the topics are too complex for the students, some also stated they found it easier to teach critical thinking than to educate thinking in a conforming manner (Munniksma et al. 2017, pp. 123 – 130). In relation to this, De Jong has pointed out that the Dutch identity – if there is any – is one of anti-authoritarian and individualistic thinking (2020). This could mean that the EDC issue of the Netherlands is partly rooted in the national identity.

The results were cause for concern for the Dutch parliament and the national organization of secondary schools – the VO-Raad. In the context of growing polarization and radicalisation in society, it was decided that intervention was necessary in order to improve the state of EDC and that the alterations should take place within the school system⁷).

The call for improvement of EDC in the Netherlands resulted in *a new legislation* – Law for Clarification of Education for Citizenship, which should provide a framework of regulations for both primary and secondary schools that clarifies and specifies the obligatory contents of EDC. The main aim is “to encourage active citizenship and social cohesion in a targeted and consistent manner”. Several new guidelines are formulated in the addition to the old law. For instance, students should be taught respect for and knowledge of the constitution and the basic values of the democratic state, the rule of law, and the constitution. They should be taught respect for and knowledge of different religions and cultures, as well as diversity related to health and sexual and political orientation. The students should be taught

respect for the principle of equality for all, in the context of the diversity and multiculturalism in Dutch society. Moreover, the school environment should reflect the norms and values of a democratic society, in order to serve as an example and place for students to “practice” their citizenship skills. The following core concepts should be integrated in both primary and secondary schools: freedom of speech, equality for everyone, encouragement of autonomy, tolerance, a sense of responsibility, and finally discouraging practices that disagree with these values. By integrating these aspects of a democracy in the school, it is to form a place for children to “practice” citizenship in an accessible environment. In addition, the school must stimulate students to actively practice in this field⁸). Remarkably, the guidelines for primary and secondary education are nearly identical, thus not clearly tailored for the different types of EDC required at the school levels. Furthermore, in my view, the new guidelines were kept quite brief when compared to the alarming reaction to the ICCS rapport.

2.2. Structure of EDC in formal education, the most significant studies and current legislation in Bulgaria

If we should do an overview of the structure of EDC in Bulgaria within modern *formal education*, it should be noted that since 1996 Bulgarian educational school system has a pedagogical direction “Civic education”, which is carried out through the principles of the holistic paradigm, i.e. Civic Education (EDC) is part of all subjects, but there is no training in the separated subject “Civic Education” (Kolarova 2014, pp. 225 – 228).

Since 1997 – 1998 in the university practice of Bulgaria, the subject “Civic Education” (i.e., EDC) is usually studied at the academic level in almost all universities in the grades “Bachelor” and “Master” in the specialty “Social Pedagogy and Social Affairs”, which prepares social workers.

In terms of content, Civic Education develops primarily as scientific developments and searches.

The academic discipline “Civic Education” in universities was developed at the end of the 90s of the 20th century with university teams led by Prof. Dr. Petar Balkanski. Prof. Rumen Valchev first introduced the term “Education for democratic citizenship” (EDC) in Bulgaria.

Academic works on civic education in Bulgaria are associated with the names of Petar Balkanski, Rumen Valchev, Zahari Zahariev, Daniela Kolarova, Tsonka Kasnakova, Ivan Ivanov, Plamen Radev, Tsetska Kolarova and others.

Today they have a large following.

Since 2015 at SU “St. Kliment Ohridski”, in FESA, there is already an active doctoral program in Civic Education.

In 2016, the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) conducted the study called the International Civic and Citizenship

Education Study (ICCS) in Bulgaria, too. Unfortunately, the ICCS results did not have such a significant impact on society in Bulgaria as it did in the Netherlands.

But the general processes in the EU, the academic work in the country and the needs of the school system as a real school life resulted in *a new legislation* – in the last five years two innovative regulations were created.

They are a by-law regulation for EDC and are under the Law on preschool and school education.

As a result of the efforts of the whole society, including and with the university contribution of FESA, in the last five years two regulations were adopted in Bulgaria that directly affect Civic education in the country's school system, as follows:

1. Regulation No 13 of 21.09.2016 on civic, health, environmental and intercultural education;

2. Regulation on the state requirements for the acquisition of the professional qualification “teacher”, 07.11.2016; 01.02.2021.

According to the latest amendments from 01.02.2021 in this regulation, the subject areas in school education are clearly distinguished: Psychology 8th grade, Logic 9th grade, Ethics 10th grade, Law 11th grade, World and personality 12th grade, Philosophy – Grades 8 – 10 and Civics Education for Grades 11 – 12, and the role of civic education in school is increasingly expanding.

From 2020, the paradigm of the understanding and application of Civic Education changed from holistic to individualistic and for the first time the subject “Civic Education” was introduced in the Bulgarian education system, albeit as an optional and/or elective subject (Kolarova 2014, pp. 225 – 228).

The nature of this subject in Bulgaria is debated by experts from several scientific fields – Pedagogical Sciences, Philosophical Sciences or Social Sciences, and at this stage this extramural dispute has not been resolved in the country.

In this context, for the Anglo-Saxon world, the content of the taught knowledge is traditionally designated as Social Sciences – this is also the name of the subject in school.

I am partial to this name because I think that the real knowledge that a person needs to become a good citizen, to have the competence to understand the complex processes in a modern democratic society and to form a worldview, actually comes precisely from the social sciences. But it must be taught by persons with pedagogical skills – and these must be either pedagogues with training in social sciences, or persons who have graduated from social sciences, with pedagogical qualifications. In any case, this is not a question of EDC belonging to the philosophical sciences, as is the understanding in Bulgaria so far.

But traditions and practices in European countries are different, and this circumstance supports the arguments of those disputing in Bulgaria on this issue.

At this stage, the question remains unresolved, accordingly – the dispute about who should prepare specialists for the school system is not resolved, if this trend

of development is maintained in the future both in Bulgaria and in the other EU countries.

In this sense, it is of particular importance for Bulgaria what will be the choice of the established European democracies and what will be the prevailing opinion about the EU countries.

Summaries

The present article investigates the main current problems of education for democratic citizenship in two EU countries – The Netherlands and Bulgaria, from the point of view of the: 1. the brief background of the tradition of democracy, constitutionalism and democratic citizenship in the two EU countries; 2. the structure of EDC in formal education, the most significant studies and the main requirements of the current legislation in each of two countries of EU.

Of course, on the basis of the different history and traditions, it is necessary to take into account the different levels of modern democratic achievements of the two societies, their economic and political opportunities, as well as the different degree of efforts made by democratically-minded people in the Netherlands and in Bulgaria.

It should be summarized that despite the different historical past and the varying degree of democratization of different national communities, today the two EU countries have the similar goals and take similar government actions through the legislation for the development of the educational systems towards the sustainability of democratic values for citizenship and society.

Moreover, since the beginning of this year the liberal democracy in Europe is being blatantly attacked at its borders through the war in Ukraine. Thus, there is a growing, unquestionable necessity to keep monitoring the situation in order to protect democracy.

European governments, as well as EU leadership, should continue to monitor the situation closely. If education for democratic citizenship is not up to par, additional measures must be taken.

They could look for a solution outside of formal education and turn to non-formal education as well as informal education. One can think about how to coordinate the interaction of all these spheres, as well as from the point of view of the actual social processes of the two societies. It would be interesting to think of integrating the factor of national identity into the decision. It is possible that part of the solution to the problem is people's anti-authoritarian mindset. This process could include specially designed national programs for the basic knowledge about state governance, rule of law, national constitution, human rights etc.

For countries like the Netherlands and like Bulgaria it is not excessive to make EDC a larger priority within formal education.

Such an approach could be a next step if the current regulations fail to prove effective. This would allow the analysis to be deepened and to look for more similar nowadays positions for the joint future.

We hope that the present international joint publication makes a very small contribution for such a joint future in EU.

NOTES

1. CEDCHRE 2010, Sec. I, 2.
2. WET VOOR BURGERSCHAPSONDERWIJS, 2022. VO-Raad. Retrieved December 7, 2022, from <https://www.voraad.nl/onderwerpen/burgerschapsonderwijs/wat-speelt-er>.
3. Generally a school of 8 years, from +/- 4 until +/- 12 years old.
4. Burgerschap op de Basisschool, 2021; Wet op het Primair Onderwijs, 2022.
- ⁵. Secondary school starts at approximately 12 years old, and usually lasts – depending on the type of education – between 4 and 7 years.
- ⁶. In the Netherlands this constitutes students of approximately 14 years old.
7. VO-RAAD. (2017). Burgerschapsonderwijs verdient extra aandacht. *VO-Raad*. Retrieved December 3, 2022, from
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