

Education for active citizenship in national and European context

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Abstract. *Why 2013 European Year of Citizens? Not only because we celebrate the 20th birthday of EU citizenship from when it was launched by the Maastricht Treaty. The people have to know the rights of EU citizens that are enshrined in the Treaty of European Union and complement national rights. If people know about these rights and use them, they benefit as an individual. We focus in this paper on the active component of citizenship (in terms of participation, interaction, accountability and leadership) and on the imperative of education for active citizenship as part of the paradigm of participatory culture that we face nowadays. The paper presents European context, a conceptual approach of active citizenship and education for active citizenship, focusing also on Romanian specific context. We mention that a significant part of the information from this paper was used and enriched during the project “Empowering youth Leadership for Democracy Sustainability” RO-13-E9-2013-R1, financed by Youth in Action, and developed as main applicant by Pro Global Science Association, Romania.*

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JEL Codes: I00, I29

1. European context

The year 2013 was designated as the ‘European Year of Citizens’ on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of establishing the citizenship of the European Union by the Treaty of Maastricht on 1st November 1993. The objective of the European Year of Citizens is to facilitate the exercise of the right of the EU citizens to free movement and stay in the UE, making sure that they may easily refer to the information on their rights. The citizens should be aware of their right to free stay in the EU, of how they can benefit from the EU rights and policies; their active participation in the process of EU policy making should be stimulated, the debates on the impact and potential right of free movement should be encouraged, in particular in relation with the consolidation of the cohesion and mutual understanding between people.

According to the 2010 research surveys on European citizenship, 43% of the respondents in the 27 member states of the EU are familiar with the term ‘citizen of the EU’ and know what that means, 36% are familiar with the term but ignore its meaning, and 22% have never heard of this term. So, over 50% of the respondents ignore the meaning of the term ‘citizen of the European Union’! Moreover, over 60% of the respondents do not consider themselves well informed or informed at all in relation with the rights of a European citizen (only 3% deem that they are well informed on their rights, 29% consider themselves well informed, 48% consider they are not so well informed and 19% consider they are not at all informed.

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Under such circumstances, education for active citizenship becomes an imperative, both European and Romanian.

2. Active citizenship – conceptual approach

With the end of the Cold War, the fast processes of modernization, the various events and changes occurred in Europe, have changed the traditional citizenship model. New forms of citizenship appeared to cope with the challenges. Now the citizens should be not only informed and understand their formal responsibilities as citizens, but also be active – capable and willing to contribute to the life of their community, country and of the whole world, should actively participate expressing their individuality and supporting the problem-solving endeavors. Change and great challenges required strong societies, with informed and competent leaders and citizens.

According to the study ‘*Study on Active Citizenship Education*’, *European Commission, DG Education and Culture 2007*, active citizenship refers not only to the exercise of civil rights and to democracy. Education for active citizenship is important also from the point of view of the socio-cultural aspects, including the integration of the new-comers and ethnic minorities, and multiculturalism. Moreover, active citizenship should empower, as a first step in providing people with voice and courage to support themselves and the group they represent. The active component of citizenship is mostly understood in terms of participation, interaction, accountability and leadership. According to the above-mentioned study, the thematic priorities of active citizenship are the following: democratic participation (63% of the respondents), social cohesion/integration (46% of the respondents), empowering (46%) of the respondents, multiculturalism (39% of the respondents), civil rights (18% of the respondents), peace and resolving conflicts (18% of the respondents), human rights (16% of the respondents), children rights (12% of the respondents), prevention (12% of the respondents), consumer rights (7% of the respondents). The interviews conducted during this study resulted in the following specific interpretations of active citizenship¹:

- understanding all the facets of democracy;
- observing the rights of the peers and of diversity; being aware of the gender issues, being open to various points of view and traditions that may be different from the usual ones;
- being informed beyond the official points of view and open to discussion;
- being autonomous and assuming responsibility for one’s own actions;
- being able to work together with the peers to attain a common objective;
- being aware of someone’s rights and of the way in which they can be used to the benefit of a group or of a wider community;
- working for a consensus and decision-making by dialogue and cooperation;
- confidence in acting and fighting for change;
- improving the quality of community life and environment.

These interpretations are present to a great extent also in the approaches on active citizenship in Romania. In the recent paper entitled ‘*Introduction to extracurricular education for active citizenship*’ (ARDR, FPD, 2012) it is set out that an active citizen has the following characteristics, to be referred to also in the line of education:

¹ European Commission, DG Education and Culture, Study on Active Citizenship Education, Final Report submitted by GHK, February 2007, pp. 26-27.

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- being aware of the rights and liabilities as a citizen;
 - being informed in relation with political and social life and the European, national and local issues and events ;
 - being concerned with the welfare of the peers, in particular of the members of the community they belong to;
 - boldly expressing opinions and arguments and doing it as clearly as possible;
 - being active in the group/community and aware of the potential contribution and capacity of influencing change: problem-solving or group or community objectives attainment;
 - being responsible in the actions performed as a citizen.

The agreed indicators related to active citizenship and monitored by European Social Survey, World Values Studies and Euro-barometer are:

1. Social participation
 - Voluntary work for the organizations
 - Organization for the community
2. Political participation
 - Participation in voting
 - Participation in peaceful protest
 - Participation in public debate
 - Membership in political party
 - Membership in group of interests.

3. Education for active citizenship

The education for active citizenship (often known also under other names, such as: education for democratic citizenship, civic education, education for citizenship, education for human rights etc.) refers in general to encouraging the young people training for the roles and responsibilities of citizens and, in particular, the role of education (by teaching – learning) in this preparation process. Simona Velea, a researcher at the Institute of Education Sciences from Bucharest, sets forth that in the context of education for citizenship, the relationship teacher – student involves certain characteristics deriving from the specific nature of this type of education and from the following key concepts: accountability, human rights, participatory democracy, empowerment. The education for citizenship belongs to the paradigm according to which the teacher's role should not limit itself to conveying knowledge, and the student's to listen and acquire information. The teacher should be more than an organizer of the learning situations and a connection element between the student and the society, mediating and enabling the access to information. The students' involvement in the decision-making process starts in the very context of the teaching process, under all its aspects: teaching-learning-assessment. The modification of the teacher's role is reflected in: interdisciplinary knowledge vs. mono-disciplinary knowledge, linear, static teaching-learning process vs. dynamic, interactive educational process (class management, teaching methods, learning by cooperation, assessment etc)².

² Velea S., Educatie pentru cetatenie democratica. Concepte si competente cheie (Education for democrastiv citizenship. Key concepts and competencies), Institute of Education Sciences, extract in 08.02.2013 in <http://civica-online.ro/competente/competente.html>

Therefore, active citizenship may be better understood by the student/adult-centered type of instruction and not by passive learning. The experts in education deem that a proper education may facilitate for the young people and the adults choosing long life learning the acquisition and understanding of the ways in which they can influence the development of their communities and of the planet.

According to the European approach, the education for active citizenship³:

- includes any formal, non-formal or informal educational activity which prepares an individual to act all his/her life as an active and responsible citizen, who respects the peers rights;
- attempts to contribute to social cohesion, mutual understanding, intercultural and inter-religious dialogue, and to solidarity, promoting the equality between men and women and fostering peaceful relationships between peoples;
- represents an innovation factor both in point of the organization and management of the learning systems in general, and of the curriculum and teaching methods.

The usual types of adequate educational methods for active citizenship are the following: cognitive methods/providing information, discussion/debates, peer learning), simulation, applications to real problems/aspects, new media technologies use, role play, interactive learning, facilitation/mediation.

With reference to the ways in which the young people learn to be active citizens and 'participate in the governing process', a more and more important aspect in current European societies, it is worth mentioning the results of the research report submitted by the Institute of Education Sciences⁴, whose authors conclude after the due research and comparative studies performed that at the European level the circumstances differ from one country to another even if almost in any country, the curricula of the European education institutions include information (knowledge) on the electoral systems, constitutional provisions, political institutions and voting habits. A seemingly almost general issue is that such knowledge is provided at ages when the components of the generation abandoned school and passed already to the employment world and in so doing were deprived of the elementary civic knowledge. It is also in schools that students are taught about participation, by organizing internal elections for class representatives, of the year or school or organizing meetings with politicians, with researchers or involving the schools in the community life.

4. Conclusions

The education for active citizenship belongs to the paradigm of participatory culture, which should be induced to the young people since high school or college. The young people of nowadays Europe should participate, be active citizens who have a say about the issues that are relevant for them. The European Union devised the participatory instruments (*The European Citizens' Initiative, Structured Dialogue, European Youth Portal*), but the education for active citizenship is still necessary. The European Citizens' Initiative (see <http://ec.europa.eu/citizens-initiative/public/welcome>) allows to one million EU citizens to participate directly in the development of EU policies, requesting the European Commission to submit a legislative proposal. The EU structured dialogue implies consultation with young people and youth organizations at all the levels of the member states, in the EU youth conferences and during the European Youth Week, the European Youth Portal (see http://ec.europa.eu/youth/index_en.htm) provides for a lot of information related to the Youth in Action Programme, the European Volunteering Services, youth

³ Pasatoiu C, Rata N., Plugaru D., Petcu R., Bularda D., Pasatoiu F., *Introducere in educatia extracurriculara pentru cetatenie activa* (Introduction to extracurricular education for active citizenship), ARDR, FPDL, Targu Jiu, Gorj, March 2012, p. 8.

⁴ Plaesu A. (coord.), Mitulescu S., Dalu A.M., Lazar M., Iftode O., Manu M., Stefanescu I, Tuca C., *Cetatenia si participarea politica a tinerilor din Romania* (Citizenship and political participation of young people of Romania), research report, Institute of Education Sciences, 2011, p. 62.

conferences etc. and allows the young people to address questions and exchange experiences. It is worth mentioning the ‘Youth on the Move’ Initiative launched by the European Union as a part of ‘Europa 2020’ Strategy (also present in Romania in 28.09.2012) which enabled the young people, their families, the teachers to get informed and know the opportunities to improve their education, competencies, qualifications and employability.

Active citizenship is therefore a matter of getting informed and of education that the societies should assume. In the section Active Citizenship – European (EU), the European Youth Portal provide for useful documents, links to projects and organizations which may be actual instruments in promoting participation in society and should be made known to young people through education: *Association of Voluntary Service Organisations, Decide for Europe, Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights, Election processes in detail, Euractiv, European Ombudsman, European Parliament – Citizens’ enquiry service, European Women’s Lobby, European Youth Forum, European Youth Parliament, Examples of Youth Initiatives and Youth Democracy projects, Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, Pan-EU Youth: A place for expression for Young European Citizens, Politeia, Taking it Global: Inspire - Inform – Involve* etc.

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