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Civic education as a foundation of a strong democratic society

| Democracy – civil society

Although the roots of democracy in Poland can be traced back to as early as the fifteenth century, i.e. the times of the nobles' democracy, the process of the Polish political system democratization should be associated with a much later period, i.e. the system's transformation after 1989. The formation of the liberal-democratic governance and market economy fundamentally changed the character of the country. In comparison to other countries, the history of Polish democracy is thus relatively short.

Democracy is understood in many ways, but the three main models: procedural, substantive and participatory, are usually distinguished. Procedural democracy is based on a set of procedures under which political decisions are taken. This model ensures clarity of criteria, conditions of elections and the functioning of authorities, and sets out the rights and responsibilities of political entities, ensuring the functioning of a democratic state. Meanwhile, substantial democracy refers to the idea of the common good. It emphasizes standards and values which cannot be guaranteed exclusively by procedures. Democracy is expected to set values such as justice, morality, honesty, order, prosperity, happiness. However, participatory democracy is related to the process of collective decision-making. This model emphasizes the form and degree of active participation of citizens in governance. It creates opportunities for greater participation, while civic activity is not limited to elections, but involves much more frequent and more intensive efforts to influence a broad public sphere. Italian political theorist Giovanni Sartori (1998) says that participatory democracy is

a type of democracy that involves personal and active participation and eager involvement of citizens in the process of making various decisions.

The basis of participatory democracy is deliberation and, therefore, discussion, dialogue and communication relating to the most important public affairs. Owing to it, genuine commitment of as many citizens as possible in a variety of state affairs, becomes real. The aim of universal, public debate is to consolidate it and involve those who so far have preferred to stand aside. Such a debate requires individuals to have virtues such as openness, communication skills, equality of views and non-aggressive attitudes towards different opinions. Active participation in democratic deliberation, however, does not automatically solve all problems. The ideal of deliberative democracy is that citizens discuss different values, leading fundamental discourses in political terms, and aim to achieve a practical agreement on core issues. Deliberative democracy is therefore a system based on the culture of litigation and arguing. Education should promote the culture, as it is hard to imagine conducting public debates without a good education, it becomes almost impossible.

It is worth noting that the three models of democracy presented above interact closely with each other. The paper focuses on a participatory democracy that imposes much higher requirements on citizens than a representative democracy. The question that arises in this context is whether citizens are able to use participatory democracy.

In the face of changing social and economic conditions, new phenomena still appear. A decline of civic engagement in all democracies has been observed in recent decades. Robert Dahl (2007), an American sociologist and political scientist, wonders why citizens, apart from elections, rarely participate in public life. Modern democracies have in fact a number of instruments that allow participation of citizens in decision-making. Among the reasons of the lack of participation, he indicates, *inter alia*, citizens' conviction that their actions do not matter and have no real impact on the decision-making process; this involves a low sense of political efficacy. Moreover, they expect that beneficial outcomes (or election results) will occur even without their involvement. In addition, citizens believe that their knowledge is too limited to allow their effective participation. This way of thinking naturally discourages them to take any action.

In their reports on the state of democracy in Europe, the Council of Europe stresses the threat to democracy on the European continent. Among other things, they point to too little interest in politics among the majority of citizens and little involvement of citizens in decision-making.

Appropriate involvement at the grass-roots level is particularly important in countries that have gone through the process of transformation. Observing the engagement of Polish citizens even at the local level, one can see that it is insufficient. Active citizenship can take at least four forms: verbal, potential, enclave and "empirical" ("survey-related") (Gliński, Palska, 1996). Verbal

activity is speaking out on social issues, advising and formulating advice. The second type of activity is reflected in many statements which present a certain level of civic readiness or willingness to understand social phenomena and to determine one's own position in them. The enclave activity is outside the realm of declarations, as it is carried out mainly through participation in socio-civic movements, initiatives and organizations. The fourth dimension of civic activity is the empirical activity which is indicated by declared participation in civic affairs reflected in representative polls. These activities are at a low level as it is difficult to encourage Poles to participate through personal interaction, to connect businesses and community groups, and to find direct solutions of local issues. Citizens seem to choose "non-political freedom" which does not need and does not create agreements and associations, denies the meaningfulness of collective action, because there is no place for public trust, or the risk of joint action (Śpiewak, 2002). Therefore, it is worth looking at the attitude of Poles towards the democratic system in which they live. Is the stability of the democratic system in danger? Can democracy without participation escalate over time into authoritarianism?

Research conducted in Poland for almost twenty years provide feedback about democracy (Centrum Badania Opinii Społecznej [CBOS], 2011). The attitude towards it has been consistently positive, 68 percent of respondents believe that democracy is superior to other forms of government, which reflects the acceptance of the current political system. Polish citizens are less likely to acquiesce to non-democratic governments in certain situations. Seven out of ten Poles (71%) agree with the view that democracy is not a good political system, but the best of the existing ones. Poles are divided when it comes to assessing the practical side of democracy, i.e. the way it functions in Poland. Less than half (47%) of people are satisfied with it and the same number of Poles are disappointed. Satisfaction with democracy is significantly higher among people with higher education, high income, and living in big cities.

Poles approve democracy as a value, but they are critical of the way it works in their country (CBOS, 2010). According to Poles, the most important principles of democracy are: equality before the law, equal opportunities for education, electing politicians to run the country, the ability to elect different political parties, as well as the protection of personal freedom of citizens. For the vast majority (three-quarters of respondents), very important features of democracy include state funding of specific areas of life such as: health, education, culture, state's care for the welfare of citizens, as well as freedom of expression and assembly.

Issues much less associated with the concept of democracy are decentralization, i.e. transferring the largest possible powers to local governments and minimizing state interference in the daily lives of citizens. Most respondents attribute characteristics relating to freedom and civil liberties to democracy as a sociopolitical system, but it seems that respondents forget or do not realize that

democracy also gives them a great opportunity to influence on a situation in the country. Their co-decision-making, co-participation and advising can enrich and complement the traditional democratic mechanisms and contribute to the modern public sector management. It is difficult because citizenship must first capture the minds and hearts, and above all the habits of people as a rule without external sanctions (Dahrendorf, 1994).

Discussing active citizenship, we should mention social capital. Activity is in fact the main dimension of the capital. The theory of social capital assumes that knowledge and skills, or human capital, are the essence thereof, but the most important element is the tendency to connect different people in groups in order to achieve their common goals. People often interact to improve an individual situation or solve broader social problems. The measure of the capital is the formation of civil engagement networks, participation in democratic procedures and activities in local associations. This capital is therefore necessary to build an effective democratic order. Unfortunately, the social capital in Poland has been low for years. Citizens still insufficiently join in decision-making processes. What is the causative agent? It is difficult to give a definite answer to this question. It is worth noting that the scale of active citizenship in the Polish society is the result of not only individual behaviour, but also the historical and social conditions. It also seems that one of the important reasons may be the lack of knowledge on: “how, where and with whom to cooperate?”. This is due to the fact that the scale and complexity of public life is increasing at a very fast pace. It is more and more difficult to discuss essential issues and embrace the rapidly growing amount of information, and it is not easy to use it. Here, education could certainly help citizens.

In the context of the discussed concepts, we should also pay attention to the term “civil society” which has dominated thinking about the importance of people and their impact on the state in recent decades. It is in the framework of a democratic system, based on freedom of speech and assembly and associated with broadly defined civil liberties, that civil society has a chance to thoroughly develop. It is expected that in such a society, individuals are autonomous, they are aware of community needs and strive to satisfy them, *inter alia*, through:

- interest in social affairs;
- a sense of responsibility for the common good;
- objectives defined and implemented independently of state authorities;
- activity and ability of self-organization.

Informed participation in public life and activity of people associated with the ability of self-organization and a genuine interest in the common good are therefore the basis of civil society, at the same time affecting the practical implementation of participatory democracy. Civil society as a way of functioning of an organized space in Poland does not yet meet the common expectations. It should be emphasized, however, that civil society development is a process that takes many years, while a characteristic feature of the Polish belief is impatience

revealed in the expectation of quick results. Meanwhile, social activity, a factor necessary for the functioning of civil society cannot be the result of short-term needs, but must be based on long-term pro-social attitudes, and these are formed mostly in the process of socialization (Wódz, 2005).

The more we look at the functioning of the democratic system, the more we immerse in the issues of civil society and the practical implementation of the rule of law, the more evident the importance and need for fair civic education become. I think that today we should raise the question: how to make democracy settle stronger and permanently in civic awareness and in daily life of representatives of different generations of Poles? It is important to teach democracy, as it enhances a sense of autonomy and self-efficacy, increases understanding of reality and allows to manifest responsible and mature civic attitudes in the future. There are three main trends in civic education: informational, socializing and educational (Rymsza, 2009). The informational trend is focused on transferring knowledge about how a state functions and what the mechanisms of social life are. The socializing trend draws attention to the teaching of specific skills useful in social and political life. The educational trend stresses citizenship development. This trend assumes that a good citizen should not only be familiar with the principles of democracy and be able to effectively navigate in it, but they should also show interest in the common good, undertake *pro public bono* activities, and respect the rights of others. Therefore, civic education in a broad sense covers the whole of the content and activities aimed at raising awareness, skills, and attitudes, and preparation for commitment and responsible participation in public life.

Civic education itself is certainly not something new, on the contrary, it is as old as humanity. Each society had to build their political agenda and provide their rules to other members of the community, instilling their values, attitudes and participation mechanisms. However, informal solutions related to adult civic education in Poland do not have a rich spectrum of effects.

| Polish institutions of civic education

In Poland, after-school civic education is carried out mainly by NGOs, often referred to as voluntary organizations or public benefit organizations. Their activity ensures proper local development. Associations are one of the largest and most common groups among the existing non-governmental organizations. On the one hand, they are a social entity based on the agreement and cooperation of people, and on the other hand, they are a legal structure defined by applicable law. The Polish “Law on Associations” of 7 April 1989 (Journal of

Laws of 1989, No. 20, item 104) has been the legal basis of associations operating in Poland since 1989. In accordance with Polish regulations, the association is “a voluntary, self-governing, sustainable non-profit organization” (Journal of Laws of 1989, No. 20, item 104, sec. 1, art. 2. 1.). Its activities are based on the social work of its members, it defines its goals, programmes and organizational structures independently, and adopts internal rules for its operation. Among the 60 000 active organizations of this type, the core of the non-governmental sector includes associations involved in sport, tourism or hobby (36%), while 15 percent are involved in education and upbringing activities (Przewłocka, 2011). Foundations are another type of NGOs that operate efficiently in Poland along with associations. Originally, they were engaged in charitable activities, currently they take up social, scientific, educational and cultural activities. A foundation is defined as a legal institution established to achieve social or economically useful objectives, in accordance with the fundamental interests of a state, particularly in the area of health, economic and scientific development, education and upbringing, arts and culture, social welfare, environmental protection and preservation of historic monuments (Journal of Laws of 1991, No. 46, item 203). The Law on Foundations of 6 April 1984 is the main piece of legislation regulating the issue of foundations, their establishment and activity. A characteristic feature of a foundation is a non-profit purpose for which it has been founded. Therefore, all income derived by foundations from e.g. business activities must be designed to achieve their objectives. In 2010, 12000 foundations and 71 000 associations were registered in Poland (Herbst, Przewłocka, 2011). An annual average of about 4000 new associations and nearly 1000 foundations is registered throughout the country. Among foundations operating in Poland, linked to the promotion of democracy and civic education are: Stefan Batory Foundation, Education for Democracy, Centre for Civic Education and Robert Schuman Foundation of Poland.

Fundacja im. Stefana Batorego (The Stefan Batory Foundation) was established in 1988. Its aim is to promote the development of democracy and civil society, i.e. a society of people aware of their rights and obligations in matters concerning their local community, their country and the international community. The foundation’s priorities are: to improve the state of democracy, strengthen the role of citizens in public life, and develop international cooperation and solidarity. Improving the quality of Polish democracy, as stated in the statute, is associated with actions aimed at extending the principles of the democratic rule of law, transparency in public life and social control over public trust institutions, and preventing pathologies in public and social life. The foundation’s grant programmes implemented in 2012 are:

- Democracy in action: here grants are awarded to projects that aim to increase the participation of citizens and NGOs in public life and to promote attitudes of civic responsibility for the quality of Polish democracy;
- Civic coalitions: allows financing a coalition of NGOs from the Visegrad countries that enhance the role of civil society;

- Equal opportunities: subsidizes projects that aim to provide equal access to education for young indigent, neglected, and disabled people;
- East-West: supports international projects in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, Central Asia and the Caucasus.

The Foundation is also the editor or co-editor of several publications on topics related to the implemented projects (<http://www.batory.org.pl/>).

Fundacja Edukacja dla Demokracji (The Education for Democracy Foundation) was established in 1989 and it has been cooperating with numerous non-governmental organizations, education institutions, local government bodies, as well as with international partners in Europe and the USA. The Foundation's objective is to promote knowledge of democracy, a free market economy and civil activity in a democratic state. Paragraph 6 of the statute states that the Foundation's goal is to initiate, support and conduct education activity, aimed at propagating the idea of democracy and preparing people to work for the benefit of democracy and to participate in democratic institutions. Its activities are addressed mainly to teachers, tutors, members of non-governmental organizations and youth leaders. The activities take the form of conferences, training courses and seminars. The foundation also runs private teacher training centres and publishing business (<http://www.edudemo.org.pl/>).

Polska Fundacja im. Roberta Schumana (The Robert Schuman Foundation of Poland) was established in 1991 as a non-governmental and non-political organisation. Its aim is to encourage a civic activity of Europeans as well as to promote the European integration. Within its statutory activity, it implements education programmes which are focused upon three main issues:

1. Promoting the idea of European integration and European education;
2. Societal engagement of citizens, promoting democratic and civic values;
3. Sharing Poland's experiences of the European integration process as well as social, political and economic transformation.

The projects are addressed mainly to young people and teachers. Through a network of European clubs, the foundation encourages them to engage in public life, civil actions for a local community and volunteering. In addition, every year it organizes the Schuman Parade which is a celebration and an opportunity to manifest support for democracy and change (<http://schuman.pl/fundacja/>).

Centrum Edukacji Obywatelskiej (The Centre for Citizenship Education) [CEO] is the youngest of these organizations as it was established in 1994. It disseminates knowledge, skills and attitudes required in building a civil society. The objectives of the foundation are described in paragraph 4 of the statute which states that it has been established to improve the quality of the education system, prevent social exclusion, raise awareness and knowledge of citizenship and entrepreneurship by promoting the fundamental principles of life in a democratic society in a market economy. The foundation's offer is addressed

to teachers, and it involves promoting co-operation between teachers, teacher training, methodical consultancy, e-learning courses, developing textbooks, curricula, lesson plans, and organizing trips abroad in order to get acquainted with the methods of civic education in other countries. In 2010, the programme involved over 3000 people, including more than 2000 teachers and 1000 students (<http://www.ceo.org.pl>).

It is worth noting that pursuing its mission, each of the foundations uses various forms of activity. Most of them carry out their activities with a view of individuals, but there are also those that address their projects to other organizations and institutions.

In addition to foundations, there are also associations in Poland whose purpose is civic engagement and education. An example is **Spoleczne Towarzystwo Oświatowe** (Social Education Society) [STO] established in 1988 to promote the idea of a modern Polish school and to support civic initiatives aimed at enriching the education of children, adolescents and adults. It seeks to improve the system of national education and civil society development. After its inception, the society supported with their opinions the solidarity team who dealt with education issues at the Round Table, and it has engaged in the legislative work of the Ministry of Education and the Parliament. Currently, members of the society are organized in local centres throughout the country, and they cooperate with various European education associations. They also participate in programmes of the European Union, such as “Learning for Life,” Comenius and Leonardo da Vinci (<http://www.sto.org.pl/>).

Stowarzyszenie Akcja Społeczna (The Social Action Association) [SAS] is another organization that promotes the development of democracy. The activities of the organization are focused on building educated and efficient civil society informed of their rights. The SAS Association aims to enhance the efficiency and stability of civil society conscious of their rights. This is done by improving the public’s access to legal, civil and psychosocial consultancy, stimulating civic energy, developing equal opportunities for citizens, mobilizing legal practitioners to work pro bono for the benefit of local communities. The programme is based on a comprehensive analysis of the needs of the local community in the region and its scope is extended in accordance with the expectations of beneficiaries. The association helps all in need, especially the poor, unemployed, homeless, disabled, experiencing violence, helpless in matters of parental care, addicted to alcohol, drugs and other substances (<http://www.gdansk.bpo.engo.pl/sas.html>).

The non-governmental organizations mentioned herein are just examples of the type of institutions involved in the development of skills for participation in public life and shaping active attitudes in this regard. All of them address their programmes to broad social groups, trying to teach democracy. Apart from them, the following entities are predestined to the role of educators: umbrella organizations (federations) and networks of organizations, watchdogs, think

tanks involved in the shaping of public policies (Koziarek, 2011, p. 3). The analysis of the current functioning of these organizations and institutions shows that they have a great potential in the area of non-formal civic education which can be used and developed in different ways.

In conclusion, it can be said that the importance of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Poland is gradually increasing, but compared to NGOs in other countries of the European Union, the situation is not satisfactory yet. However, this movement is being developed and consolidated in the legal, institutional and infrastructural terms. Analysing the areas of civic education in Poland, we can see that the characteristic feature thereof is focusing on a specific audience, namely school youth and teachers. Other social groups are outside the scope of civic education programmes. This is a major threat to democracy, because the key principle of democracy is the participation of all social groups in political matters. Active citizenship is closely related to the knowledge and understanding of basic political processes and the functioning of a political system. Without this knowledge, it is difficult to engage in public affairs and defend one's own interests.

| Conclusions

Today, it becomes increasingly challenging to ensure proper functioning of democracy, improve its efficiency and quality, and expand its impact. This is related to the essential tasks of civic education in a world where we often encounter passive, irresponsible citizens who distance themselves from public life, having no sense of agency. It is difficult to build a democracy in a passive society that does not feel responsible for its own state. There is no greater threat to democracy than the indifference and passivity on the part of citizens (Dahrendorf, 1994). This passivity can be explained by a sense of confusion in the surrounding reality, which in turn is related to the lack of understanding of what is happening in the public and political sphere. The lack of democratic awareness and willingness to take action for a community can be changed through an increased emphasis on education for all social groups. Education is an important variable for determining the level of social participation. Unfortunately, civic education which aims at promoting democratic awareness, citizens' involvement and the idea of social partnership is still underestimated in Poland. Media skills are also important in education of participatory democracy. The role of media in the acquisition of information continues to grow, and citizens should be prepared to use them in a critical and responsible way. Moreover, communication skills related to the ability and willingness to listen to the others and their different

views, to present one's own opinions and arguments in public discourses, putting the common good above individual interests, are also required in a democracy. It is also important to make an analysis of advantages and disadvantages in the context of searching for possible solutions to a problem and to strive for compromise on contentious issues. Civic education provides students with a number of competencies that relate to different areas of everyday life. A common feature of all competencies is the fact that they are based on the knowledge of the concepts of democracy, citizenship and civil rights.

Civic education in schools is not sufficient. It is necessary to extend the offer for the whole of society and to implement it in the lifelong learning process. It is important that each generation acquires important civic knowledge to sustain the existing democracy. Acquisition of competence, skills and assimilation of democratic values necessary for active citizens are a process that lasts a lifetime and passes through all the phases and institutions associated with learning.

In the future, special attention should be paid to places that teach participatory democracy. I think it is important to address a wider offer to adults and seniors, giving them a better chance of involvement in the sphere of public action, and thus to build the structures and institutions of civil society. A wider education offer is also associated with an increase in the number of places where civic education could be provided. The core task is therefore to develop institutional structures supporting as far as possible the processes of democratic learning. Such structures can be formed both within and beyond the formal education, they can work in the frameworks of public or private entities. It is crucial that they contribute to the promotion of knowledge, skills, values, attitudes and behaviours that are necessary for the formation of engaged, critical and responsible citizens. The intention is not only to provide sound basic knowledge about political institutions, processes and content, but also to teach competencies. It is worth remembering that the most effective way of teaching democracy is to practice it in everyday life. There is still no model of civic education in Poland which would help to build the attitudes of activity, creativity and social participation; a model that would effectively equip an individual with tools and knowledge so desirable in a modern democracy.

Education is still considered marginal in Poland. To this date, a large burden of responsibility has been put on the third sector organizations. We should ask whether Polish non-governmental organizations that have undertaken tasks aimed at shaping responsible citizens will continue to play their role in this area without the necessary support? Will the measures taken by them and their offer prove to be so interesting to attract and encourage citizens to use them?

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