

# Civic education as a tool of self-governance

## to achieve consensus and progress

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### Key ideas:

- 1) Civic education of citizens should help citizens to understand the critical political choices for their lives and support them to actively shape them in a rational manner
- 2) Civic education in a democracy is education in self-government. Civic education is a practice that goes along with people's lives and evolves together with society
- 3) Civic education should be embraced equally by all governing institutions, media and civil society and strive to implement it in a consistent fashion

### Introduction

The authors present the “introvert” and “extrovert” elements that they reckon are important for the future of Hellas in Europe:

An “introvert” balance between federalism, liberalism and ecological development, under a framework of fiscal discipline and the maintenance of the euro as a hard currency. They advocated for policies of inclusion, and against racism and any form of discrimination, while at the same time supporting the rule of law, human rights, separation of executive, legislative and judicial powers, as well as the separation of state from religion.

They argued on the “extrovert” need for enhanced international co-operation, introduction of economic & cultural diplomacy and building strategic regional alliances.

They have tried to substantiate their policy proposals on the basis of rational argumentation and data, but they have left until now unmentioned the

most important catalyst for the commencement of the process: **the civic education of citizens.**

It is the idea that citizens should comprehend the critical political choices for their lives and actively shape them in a rational manner. Many objectives of the authorities would be only achieved in paper if the society would not share, or would not even understand, them in practice.

Is the Hellenic public ready to support the idea of a federal European Republic and the principles and policies that we are proposing? We would answer: Yes! To a significant degree the ground is fertile for such a leap. On the other hand, we also have to acknowledge that part of the Hellenic society (impossible to quantify with precision how big) is still indifferent, suspicious or hostile to our ideas. Many people remain, like in other European societies, prone to xenophobia, irrationality, superstitions, prejudices and negative stereotypes against certain groups. They oppose secularism and are indifferent to the separation of executive, legisla-

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tive and judicial powers. They are vulnerable to fake news, irrational explanations of events and outrageous conspiracy theories. They vote for populist and/or nationalistic political parties. They are only sensitive to human rights abuses if they are committed against an affiliated group (e.g. against nation X), while being indifferent or even supportive if those abuses are committed against presumably hostile groups (e.g. against religion Y or minority Z). They reject difficult policy choices which are necessary for the long-term benefit of the society (e.g. moderation of public spending), and instead they have it easy to accuse the “elites” or the “oligarchy” for making such choices. Their decisions and emotions are dominated by irrationality, self-interest and prejudice, instead of reason and values. Those people are not necessarily poorly educated. Many of them belong to the elites; many of them are intellectuals, wealthy and privileged. Sometimes we ourselves behave or think in this way, without even realising it.

The roots of such behavior run deeper. It is in human nature to think on the basis of tribal instincts and stereotypes, and to mistrust what is alien – perhaps this is one of our evolutionary features to survive. Those attitudes can be further traced in the education and values received from families, schools, media and social circles. We therefore believe that the prime task of a government would be the civic education of the members of its society with the aim to harness all those instincts, and foster consensual decisions, rational thinking, values of mutual respect and a healthy democracy.

### Civic education and its content

According to a definition, **civic education in a democracy is education in self-government**. It needs to promote a reasoned commitment to the values and principles of democracy. According to *Margaret Stimmann Branson*, “A message of importance [...] is that politics need not be [...] a zero-sum

game. The idea that “winner takes all” has no place in a democracy, because if losers lose all they will opt out of the democratic game. Sharing is essential in a democratic society - the sharing of power, of resources and of responsibilities. In a democratic society the possibility of effecting social change is ever present, if citizens have the knowledge, the skills and the will to bring it about. That knowledge, those skills and the will or necessary traits of private and public character are the products of a good civic education.”<sup>1</sup>

We subscribe to that view. We also believe that civic education must focus on the ideas of shared values, rights and responsibilities. This is the raw material of a progressive and vibrant society. In this respect, we think that the following points could form the pillars of basic civic education for all citizens. These are the subjects with which, in our view, all citizens should be acquainted:

- the institutions of their federation/state/  
municipality, its mode of governance and the separation of executive, legislative and judicial power;
- basic elements of human rights, tolerance, non-discrimination and anti-racism;
- the possibilities to participate in local, regional, national and federal governance;
- the principle of secularism;
- the rational reception of news against prejudice, irrationality, hate-speech and conspiracy theories;
- the basic principles of sustainable development, with focus on everyday matters like recycling, reduction of waste, energy efficiency or air pollution;
- the basic principles of solidarity, such as how to respect the rights and freedoms of other citizens and how to offer support to the weaker;
- the values of volunteerism, civil society, civil initiatives and self-organisation;

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the rationale of fiscal and economic policies, for example what happens with citizens' taxes and why are they imposed on them?

Civic education is not a process that only happens once and then it is deemed completed. It is rather a practice that goes along with people's lives. It evolves together with society and becomes gradually the bedrock of its progress.

Furthermore, we propose to articulate it in two strands: A) civic education as part of basic school education, and B) civic education as a life-long process.

#### Strand A) Civic education as part of the basic school education

The first and most important step would be the inclusion of civic education in the curriculum of basic school education. All these elements must be taught in simple terms to children of all ages. Basic school education should engage children in acts of civil participation. It would teach them the value of volunteerism, public participation and rational filtering of what they hear, see or read. In every year of their school life, children would learn how we are governed, about the European Union, what are the core European humanistic values, and what they mean for our daily lives. Being a separate teaching subject, civic education would be taught by specially trained teachers.

#### Strand B) Civic education as a life-long process for adults

Civic education for adults would be a more complicated exercise because adults are not subject to a controlled system of education. They are exposed to many different sources of information and opinion-making, including media, their own readings, professional, social and civil activities. In this task, we need a program of synergies of different actors:

government and public administration, as well as media and civil society.

Governmental institutions should communicate their policies in a transparent and simple manner. Hard choices need to be explained with honesty, in order for the people to understand and accept them. If an austerity measure is adopted, public authorities should justify in a simple manner why it is needed, and what policy areas it is going to serve. People need to understand the need and purpose of certain sacrifices in order to accept them.

The Ministries of the Government should explain in a few simple words their mission and the basics of their policies. Some examples: The website of the Ministry of Justice should inform citizens about the basic legal procedures: civil, criminal and administrative. Why are they separated and what purposes does each of them serve? What is the role of the public prosecutor or the investigating judge? What are the basic principles of family law or civil law? The Ministry of Environment should offer the most rational and documented information about climate change, our responsibility to tackle it, the value of recycling, how best to do it, how to save energy, how to protect the forests, how to contribute to cleaner urban air, etc.

The Parliament should be in position to clearly inform the people about its committees, how they work and what is their basic mission. How can a citizen contact a member of the Parliament? How can citizens submit petitions?

The Central Bank should educate the public, in a comprehensible manner, about the basics of financial and monetary policy. What is inflation? What is the central interest rate, and when does it go up or down? What is quantitative easing? What is a bond? What is a share? Why do the banks need capital buffers?

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Media bear a huge responsibility - perhaps the greatest - in educating the people about not only what is going on, but also why and on what basis. A code of conduct should be adopted by all media and social network platforms on how to engage themselves in the education of the citizens about their most important rights, obligations and the functioning of democracy. Media should further lead by example in the elimination of hate speech, racism and mistreatment of minorities. This is easy to say but difficult to implement: freedom of speech and information inevitably include some rotten apples, and they will always do so.

Civil society (NGOs, trade unions and all forms of citizen associations) would also bear their share in informing their members and the wider public about the topics of their concern. A few examples: possibilities for charities; engagement in environmental activities; rights of workers or pensioners; initiatives for healthier life and better quality of life. The examples could be endless, like the number of NGOs and the topics of life.

Everything above indicates that life-long civic education is a complex exercise. It would require the engagement of many different actors who themselves might have a different understanding of its content and purpose. We also have to acknowledge that it could partly be a futile exercise: despite billions of euros spent, and thousands of websites and working hours dedicated on civic education, many people would remain stuck in ignorance, tribalism and prejudice, simply because they find bigger comfort there. This is human nature. However, the overall effort would be worth it.

### Conclusion

We need to stress the need for all levels of government firstly to design a program of civic education, consisting of the pillars and strands listed

above. A second step would be the integration of civic education into the standard curriculum of basic school education that would be taught in a harmonised way across Greece and all other European countries. A third step - and certainly the most challenging one - would be the co-ordination with all governing institutions, media and civil society in sharing the parts of that program and implementing it in a consistent fashion. Central governments should dedicate adequate budget to cover the annual expenses for information and education campaigns, employment of civic education specialists in basic education and any other complementary activity.

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<sup>1</sup>Civic The Role of Education, A Forthcoming Education Policy Task Force Position Paper from the Communitarian Network [http://civiced.org/papers/articles\\_role.html](http://civiced.org/papers/articles_role.html)

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