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The Role of Civic Education In conflict societies



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A goal of the project is to ensure an early detection of nascent signs of conflicts in Georgian education establishments. These conflicts may stem from violent and discriminatory grounds and further fuel up radicalization and intolerance among students.

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Table of Content

Introduction	4
A brief historical overview	5
Society in Transition	7

Introduction

The goal of education is to provide knowledge about the world and take them to a new level of personal development. Evidently, this process can stretch throughout lifetime. We discover new things about our world on a daily basis. The more open the person is to embrace new knowledge, the more likely they are to reach new levels of development.

Civic education aims to provide the person with the knowledge about societal environment in which she or he lives. It also provides knowledge about cultures, religions, system of world outlooks existing in various societies to enable individuals to compare these different systems, participate in refining societal environment and find a role and a place in such environment.

Here we will touch upon more specific matter, more precisely, the role that civic education may play in preventing radical and extremist sentiments in the society, and averting violence-prone public processes to ensure civil peace and sustainable societal development.

The need for civic education is directly tied to the degree of democratization in a society. The less democratic the public and the state are, the less interested authorities are in having citizens with good quality of civic education, good understanding of fundamental human rights, systems and tenets of governance, legal education, and awareness of those value systems that guide the life in advanced and well-developed societies.

Civil ignorance and passiveness are the two instruments which strengthen a position of a ruler in authoritarian states. Such rulers try to replace the whole system of knowledge with a strictly defined ideology, whether it is religious doctrine, or any other ideology built on the pursuit of constructing a happy world. In the worst-case scenarios such rules force citizens to perceive their surroundings as ideal by means of propaganda, repressions or censorship, just like in the Soviet Union or Mao's China, or in North Korea for this matter. They go to great length to make others believe that truth and goodwill belong to only one ideology and lifestyle as if only they, rulers hold the key to such truth. This is otherwise called a totalitarian principle of monopoly over truth. This principle exists everywhere though in varying degrees. The greater its role is in any given society, the greater the risk is that 'political, religious or other forces claiming the absolute truth will confront each other and such a confrontation will lead to a total victory for one of them'.

Authoritarian rulers create situations whereby the essence of civic education is limited to a picture drawn by a propaganda without any chance of making choices and comparisons. Under such rulers individuals have no access to any different knowledge while citizens must have only vague and distorted understanding of what may be happening beyond their immediate surroundings or the country. In short, for any dictator the civil ignorance of their citizens is extremely important aspect to rely on.

The more democratic the state is, and higher the level of civic education of its citizens is, the less likely it is that totalitarian-prone groups will emerge.

Democracy is often referred to as rule of law. At the same time, rules prone with proclivity to totalitarianism try to establish dictatorship. The difference lies in the fact that in democracies laws are made by supreme legislative bodies established as a result of elections. These bodies are to reflect on the will of their voters rather than abiding by a any single individual or a group of such individuals who believe that only they possess the absolute truth. As we can see, the difference is critical. In democracies law-making processes rest upon a wide societal consensus rather than a will of a single individual or a group of individuals. However, consensus cannot be achieved unless citizens have civic education. Without civic education people tend to fall victims to all sorts of political, ideological and economic manipulations and are lured into a trap of unfaithful public officials and dishonest individuals.

Civic education enables individuals to understand diversity existing in their own and other societies as well as those mechanisms that exist to ensure protection of this diversity and fundamental human rights. Citizens should have sufficient knowledge to actively contribute to the construction of their societal environment which can be achieved through a combination of multi-faceted education related to history, law, religions, human rights and diverse cultures.

No civil society can exist without this type of education which serves to create environment critical to free human development and wellbeing. Only individuals with adequate education and civil initiatives are able to take care of such an environment since they are the ones who are capable of cherishing open and just societal life, revealing problems which

may undermine both individuals and societies if they are left unattended. Ultimately, such individuals create environment whereby every person can live decent lives materially and spiritually.

As indicated above, civic education together with civil initiative, is a necessary prerequisite for civil society. That is the reason why any authoritarian and unjust but tinted by propaganda rules, are threatened by 1) The active citizen who has the desire to live in a better and fair world, as well as to improve his or her environment in cooperation with fellow citizens, and 2) Civic education as a vital foundation and instrument for positive changes.

Any type of governance is likely to transform into a lifeless bureaucratic mechanism losing live connections with its citizens, if there is no control exerted by citizens. In the absence of control, this mechanism is more likely to serve the interests of its members rather than those of the society. Under such circumstances government and society appear as if living in separate worlds. This situation gives rise to estrangement and eventually to confrontations between the society and its rulers with radical sentiments simmering and a threat of a revolution looming. At the end of the day, the society has to start everything from square one.

It is the activeness of the citizen equipped with civic education that can routinely force authorities to remember all those values and ideals which they pledged to be committed to as they were ascending to power. Such activeness brings about benefits for the society: on the one hand, it pushes authorities towards reality check, make them perceive themselves as hired workers and responsible to the society, and feel the urge to stay connected with the electorate. On the other hand, by resorting to civil activeness citizens take effective measures to prevent radical sentiments from fuelling up and ensure that matters take a course of sustainable development (for more information on this subject, please refer to 8).

A brief historical overview

A brief historical overview will make it possible to trace the development of civil society, establishment of mechanisms designed to outweigh radical sentiments, and understand the role of civic education in these processes.

It is widely known that after the conquest of the Roman Empire by Germanic Barbarian tribes, European peoples had tried to restore patterns of personal and societal life established by Greeks and Romans over the stretch of many centuries. At the same time, such efforts had been made by applying to Christian philosophy. As a result of such endeavours, Barbarian warrior tribes residing all over Europe managed to transform themselves into the modern civilized nations.

Europeans imitated their Roman and Greek predecessors in every aspect of life largely through acquiring classical education. Throughout centuries they tried to base their societal life onto classical principles, no easy task indeed: ideological totalitarianism and authoritarian behaviour of rulers were extremely difficult to overcome.

Evidently, Greek-Roman world was not immune to many undesirable conceptions and events. However, several core principles, which had been shared by European peoples later on, were strongly upheld by Greeks and Romans.

One of such principles suggested that society and the state should both rest upon not only on secular or religious authorities or traditional norms, but on laws and science at the same time. It was only laws that restricted will of people – Demos whereas laws had to be made through a wider public consensus. Justice had to be based on morality and power of reason. They believed that individuals were capable of making laws that would make their lives just and secure (more information about public life in Ancient Greece please refer to Chapters II and VIII, 9, and chapter 1 Ancient Greek and Roman Philosophy).

Therefore, a principle labelled as social contract by Thomas Hobbes (1651), John Locke (1689) and Jean Jacques Rousseau (1762) had already been upheld in Ancient Greece. The principle obliged citizens to waive their rights in favour of the city state so that the latter could protect their interests and create conditions ensuring decent lives for citizens (see 4 and 5).

The second important moment was to build education on evidence-based knowledge system. In the Ancient World education was based on religion and mythology, so that when youth were introduced to sacred rites and mythological legends, representatives of the Greek and Roman worlds tried to make justification rather than an opinion of any authority, the source of any knowledge. Science started to exist independently from religious believes ensued by first examples of scientific work. Human beings came to the point whereby they had to trust their reason. Greek philosophers often tried to fathom divine truth through logical reasoning and justification.

A principle of mutual disengagement of religion and science in Medieval Europe acquired the form of the double truth theory. One of the authors of this theory, a thirteen-century philosopher and theologian Thomas Aquinas argued that

philosophy and religion share the same matter while it is only the method that makes the two of them different. If we think that these to contradict each other, we should find causes of such belief in human mind. In those times philosophical knowledge embraced all fields of knowledge, including philosophy proper, that today we call sciences.

It was in Ancient Greece where mathematical knowledge with a system of justification gained in popularity. The same times saw the emergence of philosophy as a justified system of world outlook.

In Europe this inheritance was coupled with faith stemming from Christianity suggesting that there is a divine particle in every human being which makes the human life of utmost value. This belief had laid foundation for a modern understanding of the individual.

For the Greek the whole Cosmos is built on commensurability and harmony with cosmic forces balancing each other. If this balance is disrupted the cosmic order will turn into chaos. Human beings should at all times try to strike a balance between feelings, desires and opinions. It only suffices these desires and feelings to acquire excessive importance to make reason withdraw. If reason reigns, feelings wither. That is why one of the Seven Sages of Greece Pittacus of Mytilene said that one must know the limit of everything.

The great Greek philosopher Aristotle argued that public life must be based on commensurability and balance.

Proclivity for equilibrium and the necessity to find a way out of two extremes were highlighted in Greek myths. According to one of these myths, seamen sailing through the Strait of Messina had to resort to all their skills and sagacity to escape from two demonic forces - Scylla and Charybdis, ambushing sailors in the Strait. The great Greek poet Homer describes the journey of Odysseus during which he had to sail between Scylla and Charybdis. The idea conveyed through myths was further developed into philosophical thought in Aristotle's Nicomachean ethics in which the great thinker suggested that evil hides in extremes. However attractive the extreme may look, it always hides the evil. Therefore, it is critical that equilibrium be found. Between rash and cowardice, there is bravery as a golden mean. Generosity stands in between expensiveness and parsimony. Aristotle believes that the ability to such an equilibrium is practical judgement or phronesis. The individual is valued by this very practical judgement rather than the captivity in extremes. However attractive the extreme may seem, it rips the person off virtues leaving nothing but a barbarian (see 2, Chapter 8).

A barbarian, as the Greeks referred to all non-Greeks, has no ability to bear responsibility for their choices shifting blame for consequences of their actions to others. Aristotle argues that only individuals equipped with reason are able to make rational choices as they can foresee the consequences of such choice and therefore, they are willing to take responsibility for these consequences.

Aristotle concludes that there are people who are born slaves and who tend to easily fall captives to extremes. Such individuals are only capable of making choices but fail to take responsibility for choices they make. Therefore, they need a patron to make choices and decisions on their behalf.

Please note that according to Aristotle any form of extremism, in particular those which are revealed through public life, is a source of evil regardless of a cover that conceals its nature. Aristotle views the inclination to extremism as a sign suggesting that the individual demonstrating such sign is not free, but a barbarian or a slave. Extremism brings about evil for not only for individuals themselves, but also to their immediate surrounding.

Yet another principle that deserves attention is the understanding of a dialogue in Greek philosophy. For Greek thinkers a dialogue is a road to truth. The Greeks believed that human reasoning is flawed and therefore, the truth could only be found through a dialogue with others. Hence, a free individual is gifted with the ability to engage in a dialogue in contrast with unfree persons who are locked in their own opinions or, experience total influence of others.

However, for the Greeks this principle applied to only their own ethnical and cultural environment whereas other peoples had no ability to be free citizens and live their lives in democracy because, the Greeks thought, just like slaves they were unable to hold themselves responsible for their choices. Nor were they able to find truth through a dialogue. That is why Aristotle believed that tyranny of kings was a natural form of governance for oriental peoples.

Christians, who did not recognize ethnical borders and preached that the divine particle was present in every individual, tried from the very onset to nourish the responsibility in all followers of Christianity whether it be Greeks or barbarians. Christians believed that individuals were bound to be responsible as both slaves and barbarians were no less humans than their masters. In addition, the purpose of Christianity was to emancipate all humans from mental slavery and teach them to move safely between Scylla and Charybdis. It is commonly known that Christian thinkers labelled the Aristotelian Mean the Divine Road.

A classical understanding of a free individual encompassed democracy, as a form of governance. If the Greeks believed perceived themselves as free and with the ability to make choices and held themselves responsible, then they would not allow either a king or a tyrant to manage their fates. They needed such rules of public life whereby every free individual would abide by such rules voluntarily regardless of ranks they held.

Citizens were obliged to comprehend democratic ideals of laws and city states. As a result of a legal reform undertaken by the Athenian statesman Solon in 6th century BC every citizen of Athens was obliged to make their contribution of some sorts to the management of the city and law-making process. This is considered a prototype of the modern civic education.

As mentioned above, free individuals may arrive at a shared decision only through a dialogue. The Greece democracy embraced these two aspects – unwavering adherence to the law and a dialogue between free individuals in which they tried to not only defend their opinions but arrive at the truth. If individuals resort to radicalism and uphold only radical views, by doing so they turn down an opportunity to understand what others think. When such pattern of behaviour is resorted to, the two individuals may co-exist only if one prevails over the other, or there is the third individual subjugating the other two. The Greeks argued that slaves and non-Greeks had no ability to engage in a dialogue and were therefore forced to live under a rule of despotic patrons and kings. Aristotle believed that only free men could cooperate for the sake of a dialogue and public affairs and therefore they were able to be free citizens of their state.

It is not accidental that Athenian democracy coincided with the Greek Enlightenment also known as the Sophist Movement. This is the time when individuals started teaching youth at certain expense. They taught math, rhetoric, legal system of the city etc. At the same time first secular schools emerged in Athens. Plato founded an academy which functioned for several centuries, while Aristotle established the lyceum.

Obviously, the ideals referred to above were never given in their purest form in the Antic World. For various historical reasons tyrants would occasionally emerge and rebellions also took place. However, this world had already been aware of those rules of life and reasoning which minimized risks of degradation of human dignity, extreme confrontations and chaos. The institute of slavery in the Classical World was built on total degradation of human dignity and value of life. As mentioned above all these ideals concerned only Greeks or citizens of Rome. However, European mankind first and foremost recognized these very ideals. A religious creed of the Christian Europeans called for the divine origin to be seen in every person regardless of race, citizenship or origin. This appeared to be critically important prism through which the Classical ideals were embraced.

In short, European peoples discovered that Greek and Roman teachings held much higher standards of understanding humans and societies and started to move towards these standards. Obviously, the road to these standards had not always been easy. Principles pertaining to Christianity and Classical World required a long-term historical experience in order to be upheld. Yet, European intellectual leaders always knew which direction to move and what ideals to pursue in this journey. While only few were acquainted with the Classical heritage within the first centuries after the fall of the Roman Empire, in the Renaissance every educated European was familiar with this heritage. Thinkers of the Enlightenment in XVII-XVIII centuries aimed at achieving greater progress of the society through promoting education. This is how principles elaborated by the Greeks transformed into a great historic force which eventually led to the modern world and its greatest achievement - civil society.

Up until 1453, that is the fall of Constantinople, we were integral part of this great world. Even after three centuries after the demise of Constantinople, our kings had been trying to restore our connection with our natural environment until fate of history made us a part of the Russian Empire.

Society in transition

Back to issues around extremism and civil confrontation, the likelihood of civil conflicts on grounds of dissenting religious beliefs, ethnic background, membership of social or other groups or lifestyle is especially strong in societies going through transitions. These are societies who have escaped certain forms of authoritarianism or totalitarianism and aspire to become democracies. Many of such countries have had no democratic experience and are trying to learn everything now. Some of these countries – including Georgia, had had some of experience with democracy, however, certain historical development had changed the course of events in another direction.

Societies in transition come to face challenges related to the establishment of rules of conduct necessary for the idea of free citizenship common to developed societies.

While the formation of civil forms of life took several hundred years in advanced democracies, the history deprived us of such opportunities and now we have to learn from our historical experience and that of Europe, shed the chains of totalitarian mentality and develop into a mature society in just few decades. The role of civic education in this process is of utmost importance.

It is obvious that most religious or other forms of confrontation are caused mainly because there is little knowledge about structure and functioning of advanced societies. Nor is there sufficient understanding of what principles are to be in place to avoid civil conflicts. The lack of understanding of social mechanisms to counterbalance radical sentiments is also evident.

Civic education is an important prerequisite for the proper functioning of these societal mechanisms. Through such mechanisms individuals get to know centuries-long experience of the mankind and come to realize that phenomena such as *democracy, pluralism, civil peace, civil responsibility* etc are not ideological norms embraced because we are tasked to do, but because these phenomena enable us to create free societies and states for free individuals.

The deficit of civic education is particularly tangible in societies in transition. Great majority of societies with the Soviet past still bear psychological and moral scars which are difficult to overcome and requires extensive period of time and efforts. For many decades individuals were allowed to participate in public life only through narrow and strictly defined ideological frame. Repressions and harsh confrontation with those who supported dissenting ideology, was a pattern observed in the country. Any attempt to break free from established ideological frames was subject to harsh repercussion even in cases where such attempts would be beneficial for the public and the state. In this context civic education was meant to ideologically train individuals rather than giving them real civic education. This distortion led to withering the will of public creativity. Passive citizens conforming to ideological norms posed no threat to the Soviet authorities.

At the same time, it was revealed that many national, religious, cultural, economic and political issues were simply concealed and covered up and as soon as harsh ideological restrictions had been lifted and the state machine free from repressions, all these problems promptly resurfaced. Social reasoning damaged by repressions and totalitarianism for many decades could not resist severity of problems as a result of which post-Soviet space turned into a hotbed for confrontation and conflicts.

As soon as political, legal and ideological pressure was released, it became evident that people were not trained to adjust their lives to a diversified world. Nor did they have sufficient social skills for this.

One of the most important reasons for turning the back to the Soviet reality, was the desire to escape from the artificial system ignoring individual freedoms. Even though societies who had been long expelled from public life lacked vital skills and knowledge without which public life often becomes a venue for radical confrontations. It is nevertheless evident that processes tend to advance and today we are not the society like in the 1990s where thousands of people bought into imaginations and false promises made by political leaders.

Yet, radical sentiments can be easily fuelled up today and we are faced with total unacceptance of dissenting views or lifestyles.

The way a social body remains vibrant and develops further is that it does not reject difference, but rather makes such difference an integral part and engages in public creative process. For a member of such society, the holder of dissenting ideology, or religious views is not an enemy, but a rival in a fair competition whereby parties need to prove their advantage.

Societies in transition have to acknowledge that their members and all groups have to live together and under no circumstances shall they consider the question of expelling any of these individuals or groups. But sometimes radical sentiments are so strong that even people with good judgement may find it difficult to believe that there may be views which are different from theirs. Moreover, the situation may become paradoxical to the effect that individuals may plan to start a normal life after they have completely expelled undesirable world outlooks. That is why even those who perceive themselves as tolerant and democratic, often liberal individuals use authoritarian language on many occasions.

Few things can be more evident than the fact that we all live in certain societies and countries and that we will have to live together in future as well. There is no moral argument to justify aggression and radicalism targeting those whose creed is not approved by us. It would be naïve to believe that the evil is accumulate in a single political, religious or other group and it will be gone if such a group vanishes. This is the belief that lays a foundation for any totalitarian regime. German Nazis promised prosperity to the German people only after all non-Aryans have been shown their places. Bolsheviks pledged quick arrival of Communism as soon as bourgeois and social groups associated with the latter

(inteligencia, clergy) were completely destroyed. These examples demonstrate that the belief suggesting that any group or groups hinder the happiness of the whole society is not as innocent as it seems and that such belief may result in the destruction of millions of individuals.

Cohabitation culture is of high value and those societies who lack such culture are doomed to constant hot or cold civil wars. The modern world is full of such examples. Constant chaos and confrontations dominate the scene leaving no place for happiness. Military rhetoric destroys even the slightest chance of peaceful and successful life.

In order for a society to adequately respond to historical challenges and create decent conditions for personal development, it must activate creative potential to the fullest. This can be achieved only with civic education.

As mentioned above, construction of public life on civil ignorance is a sign of open or concealed totalitarianism. No totalitarian ruler – whether it be state leader or that of public corporation, wants his or her subjects to know accurate information about a rival as such kind of information may lift off psychological tension and eventually lead to undermining his or her authority. Authoritarian rules need to keep their subjects in constant confrontation with any dissenting group. Knowledge and understanding of various religious believes, culture or lifestyle which is usually transformed into tolerance, means an end of their authority. There is an important psychological pattern: we find it easier to accept the difference about which we have sufficient information. This, in its turn, contributes to alleviation of radical sentiments and de-escalation of tension.

We can see that epicentres in the form of various public institutes emerged after the establishment of the Soviet totalitarianism. These institutes continue to function to this day. There is an abundance of political parties which claim to ‘possess political truth’ and reject rational dialogue with others. These ‘others’ are not only a rival, but an enemy that needs to be expelled. As a rule, such type of political parties is characterized by proclivity for worshiping their leaders. We see religious institutes which refuse to cohabit with other institutes of dissenting faith.

Authoritarianism is characterized by special relation with members of the society. It treats the latter as premature creatures who need to be guided as to what they can know and what to believe in.

Finally, the great German thinker Immanuel Kant considered European enlightenment a sign of societal maturity (see 6). Along this line, it can be concluded that the presence of a refined civic education is a sign suggesting that human beings are ready to establish a free society and act as free citizens.

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