

# **The Role of Adult Education in the Process of Rethinking the Past and its Impact on Democratization. A Case Study in Eastern Europe**

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**Abstract:** This paper will present the results of a research project that deals with the topic coming to terms with the past as a problem of adult education. This project aims to define and describe dealing with a totalitarian past in educational institutions and its impact on civic education. It concentrates on Poland, Russia and Ukraine.

In Eastern Europe the process of dealing with the past is less associated with the dealing with the own guilt (as a person and as a society), as it was practiced in the German case, but it is also closely connected with the question how to overcome the practice of elimination of plurality of opinions, how to deal with feelings of powerlessness against the state in order to believe in one's own power and to be able to use the possibilities of participation in the social and political processes. Thus, dealing with the past can be perceived as a way to democracy through civic education. This should be mentioned to begin and the paper will in the following elaborate some aspects and dimensions of the relations between civic education and dealing with the past using the example of Poland Russia and Ukraine.

## **Theoretical Framework**

One should first ask if, for a given society, coming to terms with the past is necessary in a period of political transformation and consolidation of democracy, or if the past should be ignored in favor of making a new start.

The revolutions which have taken place in all countries of Eastern Europe after the fall of communism, posed an enormous challenge for this region in all areas of life. The new social upheavals pose new questions for adult education, i.e. [that is] education which aims to give orientation, to foster identification and consolidation, and to manage change. These questions deal with confronting past events both in the lives of individuals and in the context of social development.

The new pluralistic democracy is a system that, on the one hand, guarantees citizens their rights and freedoms but, on the other hand, is based on participation and commitment. It may be said that, after the fall of totalitarian regimes, there is no building of civil society without critical inspection of the past. American political scientist Marc Morjé Howard states that the constitution of civil society depends on history and is embedded in the context of history. According to Howard, civil society in Eastern Europe fails because citizens avoid confronting their experiences with totalitarianism (Howard 2003). The dealing with the past must obviously include the "education for de-barbarization" ("Erziehung zur Entbarbarisierung"), according to the German philosopher Theodor Adorno. He states: "I would even go so far as to consider the

de-barbarization of the country one of the most important tasks of education.” (Adorno 1993, p. 91). The historical example of this process is the American and British politics of “re-education” in the post-war Germany: The main message was need for democratic attitudes through rethinking the Nazi-past (Tent 1982).

Furthermore, the main goal of education since the Enlightenment is the maturation of the individual. Maturation and democracy are inextricably interrelated. “The emancipatory educational purposes [...] essentially united in the demand for democracy and maturity (mature citizen, etc.),” writes Pauls (Pauls 1995, p. 24). One should be able to use his mind to the formation of the independent judgment on a situation. Education for maturity (Bildung zur Mündigkeit) is directly associated with the forms and methods applied to the educational practice, and thus with the arrangement of the educational processes.

Thus, there is a need for education which deals with forms and models of civil attitude, principles of responsibility and participation, and conventions of how to live together. In totalitarian regimes, power was concentrated in the hands of one group (a political party) which imposed only one direction and political ideology. This process was accompanied by the abolishment, or serious restriction, of civil and political rights and freedoms (e.g. the rights of free information and freedom of expression). In addition, political and social activities outside the given ideology were interdicted and citizens were severely controlled. Totalitarian societies with their dehumanizing, hegemonic-militaristic programs and arbitrary use of force can be considered as a revocation of humanity and as barbarism.

In Central and Eastern Europe, the process of Coming to terms with the past linked with the process to national building and establishment of a national history. Nationalism and democracy supposed to be contradicting, but Canadian-Ukrainian historian Kuzio believes that nationalism in former Soviet countries is closely related to democratization efforts and is the basis for the development of civil society: „Popular mobilization [...] in post-communist countries only occurs where national identity is strong (e.g. Poland, the Czech Republic, and the three Baltic states). Only Western-Central Ukraine is similar to the Baltic States, where a robust national identity assists mobilization in support of reform. [...] Nation building will therefore increase the potential for societal mobilization [...]. Any discussion of democratization in post-Soviet countries should not therefore divorce itself from questions of nationality, which define the size, strength, activism, and mobilization potential of civil society and therefore support for reform.”(Kuzio 2002)

The next question to be posed is why the education of an *adult* should be the focus of investigation. This question can be answered referring to the basic function of an adult as a responsible bearer of the new democracy within the political system, but also to his role within the family as an educator and mediator of values and history.

### **Research Design**

The paper is based on interviews conducted with educators from various educational communities to explore their attitudes and opinions with regard to this issue. Emphasis will be placed on the connection between the conception of the past and conception of democracy among educators. Is the process of 'coming to terms with the past' linked with the understanding of democracy? Is this process generally necessary for the democratization of the country? Interviews yield rich insights into personal biographies, experiences, opinions, values,

aspirations, attitudes, and feelings. Semi-structured interviews as used in my research project rest upon a basic schedule, in question form, of areas to be covered in the interview. The schedule guides the interview, but permits various input from the subject to come up naturally and in any order.

The participants in this research seldom refer to themselves as “adult educators”, but they perform the work of adult educators regardless of how they may denote it. They have worked at least four years in this domain and can share a lot of experiences from their everyday practice. The interviewees represent different types of educational institutions within both countries.

Following the concept that a nation expresses and transmits its traditions and experiences through education, I have chosen the educators, the human agents of education, as respondents for my empirical research. It is important to know what the educators aspire to if one wants to form an opinion on the state and progress of educational process. But their aspirations, goals and norms cannot be understood without also taking into account the current political and social situation.

The interviews were conducted in various regions of each country. In Russia they were carried out in Moscow, St.-Petersburg, the Republic of Komi (as a place where many GULAG camps were placed, such as Workuta, Uchta, Pechora), and Perm (a region, which is regarded in modern Russia as a small isle of functioning civil society). In Ukraine three regions were included: Kiev as the capital, Lviv as a regional capital of the Western Ukraine and Donetsk as a regional capital of Eastern Ukraine. The division into Western and Eastern Ukraine has a historical basis and corresponds nowadays to different political, social and ideological attitudes. In Poland the regions of Warsaw, of Gdansk and of Cracow were selected. All in all, 84 interviews were conducted. These took place in Russia during April and May of this year, in Poland in June and half of July, and in Ukraine in July and August.

All the interviews were tape-recorded. With a few exceptions all of them have been transcribed. Each participant's responses were analyzed for frequent patterns or similarities. Once this was accomplished, all findings were compared—again looking for thematic patterns that had emerged from the responses by the participants. Themes were identified – based on the participants' responses to the interview schedule. Each response was read and reread as a means of finding similarities and differences within the text. Once these were identified and noted, the passage was reread with the themes in mind and matched within the body of each response. All responses were then allocated to the appropriate themes.

### **Findings and Conclusions**

The wheel does not need to be reinvented - even in the context of civic education in Central and Eastern Europe: The democracy-learning and civic skills should form a solid and broad basis for the civic education in every democracy. However, the different experiences of the past and the ways of dealing with these experiences make the civic education in Poland, Russia and Ukraine distinctive from the civic education in the EU and in the USA. These distinctive features should be considered while analyzing the possibilities and challenges in the process of democratization in Eastern Europe. The civic education in the context of dealing with the past includes universal questions of individual life choices and possibilities to participate in a society as well as a vision for the future of the region, of the country or, depending on the context, of the European community. The distinctive challenges that arise from a relationship of civic education and the

examination of the past in Poland, Russia and Ukraine, can be elaborated using the four following dimension: the determination / redefinition of the relationship between the state and individuals, the change in values, the question of patriotism and the question of promoting the culture of dialogue.

The patriotic education is usually understood as a synonym for civic education, but with different meanings in the three countries under study. Patriotism is relatively clearly defined in Poland (and mostly in Ukraine) in terms of commitment to a democratic state and is therefore separated from exclusive nationalism. In Russia the patriotic education has mostly the exclusive dimension and is even in some cases connected to militarism.

The important aspect which was underlined as central topic concerning the process of rethinking the past against the background of the democratization concerns the relations between the individual and the state: Confronting the past is described as man's emergence from his helplessness and his worthlessness, or alternatively as an individual's empowerment. A central part of the answers deals with the issue of human rights and freedoms. The principles of the self-determination and self-realization, i.e. aspects that were particularly strongly injured during the period of communist dictatorship in Poland, were underlined: The confrontation with the past poses the question of importance of the individual. An adult educator expressed the opinion that the process of rethinking the past has to manage a "change in a certain pattern of thinking" (Interview\_P22, para 188): The conviction that the "person is important in itself, and not the person with a particular characteristic – Priests, politicians, poles or the like - has to be common" (Interview\_P22, para 188). . Moreover, a serious lack of confidence towards the state and the lack of citizen activity can still be perceived as heritage. The distinction between "us" (people) and "them" (Government) ('My i oni ') is constitutive of the Polish self-image. It follows in any case: Those, who had committed a crime during the war or later belong to "them" (the rulers who betrayed the "people"), not to "us". Thus, "the people" is by definition innocent.

It is of interest to observe the extent to which the idea of democracy is connected with the concrete practice of adult education. Many adult educators are trying to integrate the idea of democratization in smaller dimensions i.e. in the learning environment, primarily through a complete change of teaching methods." "I can say intuitively that I see a connection between the ideas, the values of democracy, which I explain through examples from the past events, and the form that is presented." (Interview\_U08, Abs. 34-35)

The adult educators in the Ukraine and in Poland mainly show a high degree of critical distance to the Soviet heritage, a commitment to the spread of democratic principles and an assessment of the real difficulties and obstacles to educational processes. In Russia it can be applied only for the representatives from NGOs. In this basic open self-reflection lies an opportunity for further development and systematization of rethinking the past. The interviews currently give the impression that only *ad hoc* approaches towards democratization of the country by confronting the totalitarian past can be found, but a comprehensive nationwide discussion is missing.

To sum up the results of the analysis we can observe that confronting the past in the learning environment against a background of democratization implies not only being informed about recent events, but also an orientation in the current situation, the ability to judge on the basis of comparisons with the past, the ability to communicate with others based on the principles of equality, and the ability to take responsibility for one's own actions. Almost all the respondents

emphasized that the educational process with regard to the past should mean that in spite of economic or political problems people retain democratic values. The emphasis on democratic values can be achieved by consciously making comparison to the totalitarian past. The fundamental difference between Poland on one side and Ukraine and Russia on the other lies in the fact that Polish democracy is now consolidated and that the Polish citizens are sure of their democratic state and its future continuity. Belonging to Europe is seen by Polish respondent as self-evidence. The collapse of the socialist regime in Poland is perceived as a return to Europe.

The model of the Polish transformation and democratization of the country has been described in several interviews as an export model for the eastern neighbors, Ukraine and Belarus: "We had benefited greatly from the experience of European democratic processes [...], so we think today that we should support those countries that are on the difficult side of the border, such as Belarus and Ukraine. Particularly Ukraine. [...] Through education and development of the institutions we want to share our experience. "(Interview\_P01, para 6)

### **Implications for Adult Education Theory and Practice**

The relevance of the topic stems from the considerable deficit of information concerning this subject in Eastern and Central Europe; moreover, there are few publications on this topic based on empirical research. It is of great interest to identify training practices and learning processes which will facilitate understanding the problem of coming to terms with the past – across groups, countries, cultures and the boundaries of identities. Furthermore, the model of the Polish transformation and democratization through education can be considered as an export model for the eastern neighbors, Ukraine and Belarus.

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