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Knowledge, Skills and Competences of Active Citizenship: Behind the Hungarian Scene

The bulk of the professional and political discourse in Hungary has been on the necessity of learning new knowledge and skills for employment purposes especially since the early 90-s. (ICT skills, foreign language skills, upgrading technical knowledge, social skills)

The theme of learning to be an active citizen is much slimmer in the literature and it usually hits the tone of *criticism or depression about the lack of a deeper level of democratic skills, democratic attitudes, and democratic traditions.*

A frequently asked question: How to counter apathy, resentment and passivity, how to dissolve the legacy of the past, the feelings of powerlessness, the lack of desire to be active citizen?

Learning is defined: as acquiring cognitive knowledge, developing skills and the will power to practice the skills. Motivation, encouraging the desire, the will to act as a responsible citizen proves to be the mountain to climb, especially in the case of the disadvantaged, marginalized population.

In 2002 a survey (as part of the European Social Survey)¹ asked the sample (representing the whole adult population) to rank items which break down the category of „the ideal citizen”. This citizen participation study discovers that the most valued items are: law-abiding behaviour, voter turnout in elections, capability to form independent opinions, and the least ranked items are: to be actively engaged in politics and be active in volunteer groups. To the question 'Have you contributed in any form to a volunteer organization during the period of the last 12 months?' 96% answered with 'no'. There were several indicators used describing active citizen's behaviour: party membership, joining campaigns, signing petitions, participation in protest meetings or in strikes, boycotting products or buying certain products based on conscious motives, wearing symbolic signs representing political beliefs, donating money etc, and in all of the cases the data demonstrate non-participation, (the level is above 90%). In the trust index the United Nations and the European Parliament scored the highest and the politicians the lowest. Nearly 50 % of persons in the sample expressed the belief that politicians are not bothered with his or her life concerns and 36 % felt incompetent in understanding politics and the issues of governance.

¹ Füstös, L.- Táll,É.(eds). Európai társadalmak összehasonlító vizsgálata I. Budapest: MTA

The literature miss the deep layers of the „software” or „humanware” side of the transformation as opposed to the hardware side. The general opinion is that meanwhile legal conditions of active citizenship (“democratic hardware”) in Hungary perfectly correspond to the requirements of a democratic state, the level of real civil activity and self-respect of citizens is rather low, and real outcomes of active citizenship are much less than could have been within the given hardware conditions. We can say however, there were some exceptional years around 1989 and there were some specific occasions (i. e. interest-groups protests, environmentalists actions, etc.) when civil activity was fairly remarkable. However, we can hardly say that civil activity in Hungary is satisfactory in general.

We conducted a research in 2003² when several focus groups were held on the theme of active citizenship. The members of the groups consisted of experts from the public, civil, and work domains of adult learning.

The general feeling we gathered from the six focus groups was that of a disillusionment. The general belief was that the concept – *active citizenship* – belongs to the field of idealism, and definitely not to the Hungarian reality.

The focus group experts illustrated their opinions as follows:

“Active citizenship in term of the rate of organised citizens (members of civil organisations) is only 5 % in Hungary, contrary to the figure of 60-70 % in Western countries” (Leader of a women’s organisation)

A remark made by a leader of a countrywide environment protection organisation was:

“In Hungary every democratic forum exists on paper, but they do not work in real life.”

This paper aims to shed light on the social barriers.

The focus group participants outlined **what active citizenship meant to them.**

Personality traits were mentioned; be brave enough to question authority figures, not to respect any form of authority, be able to generate alternatives, be proactive, be motivated to do something outside your private life, to show commitment, to be capable of acting as a leader, capable to influence others, to demonstrate civic courage, be an informed and knowledgeable citizen, to know his/her rights, to feel responsible for social issues, and to show solidarity towards others. These qualities are diametrically opposed to what was the main message of the communist era; do not change, adapt to the centrally formed objectives, be a conformed citizen. The definitions mainly circled around values, attitudes, behaviour patterns and competences, necessary skills, motivation and capacities.

²Reviewing Education and Training for Governance and Active Citizenship in Europe – A Central and Eastern European perspective (RE-ETGACE) Project coordinator: University of Nijmegen - The Netherlands Partners: University of Leuven – Belgium; University of Pécs – Hungary; University of Oradea – Romania; Slovenian Institute of Adult Education – Slovenia

“The active citizen is the person who has got ability to act and sets up a claim to be active part of the happenings outside of his/her private life.”

“The active citizenship is not always about putting things straight, but a strive to contribute to the local community life.”

“The community life development comes from below. The Swedish democratic system is based on that mentality when two fellows recognise their common interest, they don’t go to the state, but join forces and do something about it.”

“One must be strongly motivated to have civil courage. The model the child has seen in the family, the personal motivation, which comes from home and the success experienced – these are important evidently.”

The majority of the participants thought Hungarian citizens are not informed, they are not organised to be heard, they are not prepared to struggle, the personal civic courage level is low, and the democratic attitudes and mentality have not reached maturity.

“After the transition people are getting the chance of wanting to want something to do, but are they able to?” – asked an expert in community development.

„The growth of self-respect is what is needed the most”, a women’s movement civic expert declared.

„The ideology of transition accentuated individual ways to seek for happiness, to be not a loser in competition, so solidarity measures were deeply undervalued”- told a civic expert working for the unemployed.

The dominance of the psychological, individualized skill-approach can be seen not only in the examples above, but in the mainstream professional and political discourses regarding adult learning as well. The answers are usually seen to people’s lack of skills to design competency-based skill and knowledge development adult education programs, courses, formalized projects which obviously cannot offer much to develop, they mostly represent a relatively narrow view of identified life-skills.

This paper aims to shift from this psychological, individual motivational angle to a contextual one which emphasizes the shaping forces of the social structures in the deficit-outcome of active citizenship. Do the social, political and economic powers of the society really want active citizenship happen? Is the capacity to be an active citizen and to act like an active citizen is really fostered and cultivated in the normative sphere of socialization processes?

Our research came up with a lot of evidence which assessed the longterm impact of socio-historic contextual forces, powers of the normative structures.

“Possibility to act and tools are needed as well. Challenges.”

Public domain:

The previous political system did not foster alternative approaches in general, and there was an official ideology that the socialist state takes care of its citizens and it does not require any personal innovation. The majority living in the paternalistic system grew accustomed to this relationship and preserved the mental attitude of generating zero initiatives. On the other hand, the strong presence of hierarchical structures has a tendency to repress the initiatives. Furthermore - as Howard improved³ – there seems to be a tight correlation between the level of people's reliance to the communist system and their avoidance of social participation during the communist era and the off-chance of their volunteering nowadays. If we think logically, the relationship should be rather the opposite. Howard argues, that this contradiction can be explained by those general negative attitudes people have developed towards authorities and civil participation within the former regime. Till this time these unfavorable attitudes have not been transformed by democratic transition, what is more, the disillusionment concerning the new social system has deepened it

"It's not about that people don't know their rights. The people don't believe in their rights to be realised and their possibilities. It's the feudal attitude of the dark middle age. It's not about active citizenship, it's about whether they are taken as being human beings essentially or not."

A leading expert on community development added:

"Traditions of real active citizenship are not too significant. Before 1989 the official ideology made citizens be active certainly in the form of adjustment and fulfilment. In the 80-ies some independent, real civil movements occurred, such as amateur theatres, beat movement, or a very few workers' clubs showing that changing was possible. Although after 1989 hard political walls disappeared, soft barriers did not generate strong resistance or there was not a lot at stake. Unfortunately, transition to democracy has not finished, and authoritarianism continues existing in lighter forms. These all are against obtaining the knowledge of active citizenship."

The new political elite started to work as a law-making engine creating new institutional frameworks and mechanisms. There was not much effort at government policy level to address, the issue of deeper mobilization, the education or re-education of people, and the new parties's programs seemed not to accentuate this aspect at all. These materials focus only on general principles, values.

The civic experts emphasised that the political system and the politicians want to forcefully quicken the pace of social changes and EU demands, but only rhetorically, they turn aggressive

³ Howard, Marc Morjé (2003): Why post-communist citizens don not join voluntary organizations. In: Badescu, Gabriel - Uslaner, Eric M. (eds.): Social capital and the transition to democracy. London, Routledge. 165-183. p.

when encountered by real people power that is able to question their acts. It is really striking how slowly the interest representation has evolved in the country.

“Citizen activity or mobilisation is accepted and appreciated only when it is within the field of power, when it’s outside, they call it subversive. Power perceives initiatives others make as an attack.”

„The main problem remains: the wide gap between de jure and de facto gender equality, which indicates that European norms and standards do not yet form an integral part of social mechanisms”

“The power and the civil society go against each other; to co-operate and arrive at consensus is difficult. We don’t know about the positive ways of [mutual, negotiated] problem solving, we know only the confrontation.”

The mental heritage has been built in the educational system as well.

“The educational system does a lot to shape the youth non-active, since the non-active will be the successful ones. The system is very actively socialises them to be non-active in the world of the work also.”

An expert in teacher training expressed her view that even the school’s environment puts an emphasis on competition, and the pro-social solidarity level decreases.

“Pro-social skills must be developed in childhood, this is the precondition of being able to self-study in adulthood. People can not learn these skills only at school. Unfortunately we train those teachers, who had no democratic experiences in their young age.”

A women-expert blamed the political actors and the prevalent patriarchal culture for the negative turn in gender politics as women’s visibility in the public sphere has decreased since 1989. Party programmes did not touch upon women’s issues, or did that in a simplified form, equating women with family, no formative politicians appeared who would have had a gender equality message in their programs. Initiatives putting women’s interests in the centre of a candidate’s programme were abandoned.

„The general gender blindness of Hungarian society, academia and politics explains why even female politicians find it useless to talk about „special women’s interests” - they believe in the general, unisex nature of politics.”

„The database of the Equal Opportunities Directorate lists more than 350 organisations that claim to be actively involved with women’s issues. Less than 10 can be identified as „feminist” in a political sense.”

A university researcher on self-governance remarked: “Activity of the younger generation has remarkably declined, or more precisely has never existed in the post-transitional period. ...In

Hungary civil participation is missing from the process of transition to democracy. Transition is conducted by the elite. So no wonder that there is a shortage in real experience on active citizenship.

An expert of a community development centre remarked: "Activity requires information, but local government filters local publicity according to its interest."

Another symptom of the democratic deficit of the state is the attitude of authoritarianism. People working in government bodies or in public institutions seem to be representatives of superior power than as public servants.

A leader of a charity organisation said: "Partnership between government and civil organisations must be a relation of equal parties. None of them are allowed to add extra requirements, all of them have to fulfil contracts, and otherwise constitutionality can be questioned. The greatest barrier of partnership is their 'meeting point', and that is the administrative body. Attitudes of government officials should change."

Experts agreed that it does not help when the state violates contracts with civic groups or the rights of citizens. The Roma rights expert stated that the dominant violators of Roma people's rights are; local authorities, police, and the schools. She mentioned a case when she was preparing a complaint tour, and a local mayor asked her and her female colleague, "You, pretty ladies, how on earth can you protect these animals?" (Meaning the local Roma), denying the essential equality of human beings.

The mental heritage is still 'cultivated' at most **workplaces**. It was felt that some foreign companies that came from democratic western countries after the transition 'do as Romans do', and forget their presumably democratic working culture. As a consultant in the work domain summarised:

"The issue is about 'being competitive and effective' versus democratic. There are societies that allow being more democratic in the workplaces, because they are effective by that way also. The western company is democratic at home because of it is forced to be that [i.e. the legal rules create an environment of forcing it to be more democratic] - here it finds much more soft limitations."

The opinion was that the sphere of work usually lacks conscious attempts to develop active citizens. A very successful management consultant told us that in the last 11 years he does not remember in any of his cases of consultancy that the words, „ active citizen", surfaced at all. The expert could recall only one example when the top manager of a large company experimented with democratic decision making techniques in the company. The general opinion was that company culture fosters conformity and adaptation arising both from technology requirements and the autocratic type of leadership culture. A national trade union leader said when the values

of competition and efficiency are effectively promoted it usually devalues the issue of democracy and active citizenship. The mentally inherited inactivity as well as the newly developed passive behaviour in the working domain however substantively and simply originate in the economy as an external factor. In the case of a less developed economy the economic well-being of citizens is generally unsatisfactory, and it results in the emergence of individual ambitions and interests for getting better rather than fostering volunteer cooperation. Therefore a significant and permanent development of economic conditions is one of the most important factors for strengthening civil society among others.

There is a perception that the development of rank and file is not that important in companies. A HRD director mentioned that 80 % of their work force is semi-skilled, but disciplined work is expected from them, and the skill to follow the technology is planned in detail.

The larger sized companies have run training programs for the new employees, which involve information booklets about the companies, meetings with trade union leaders, and information on employment rights and duties. But smaller companies do not operate as such. The training programs, if any, concentrate on technological issues and upgrading professional knowledge, but general knowledge and competencies are not developed at all.

The trade union representatives in the focus groups were very unhappy that trade union activities in adult training have dramatically shrunk because of the lack of resources. Trade unions are not part of civil society in Hungary and they can not apply for civic groups' resources. Even the trade union activists' training is slim and seldom.

Experts felt that the over-politicised atmosphere delegitimises the **civil sphere**.

It seems to many policy analysts, that the NGO-government relationship is at the core of the attempt to create a civil society in post-communist Hungary. It may well be an imperfect relationship, accompanied by distrust and misconceptions. Nonetheless, it is clear that the model of building a civil society in opposition to, or to the exclusion of, the state is not a possibility.

After the political transition to democracy the civil sector began to develop very quickly, but very controversially. Because of uncertain regulations many civil organisations took unfair advantages of the situation and damaged the reputation of all the others. Consequently on the government side there was a great temptation to leave the whole civil sector alone, in other words to reduce state support and state control as well. This model of further development would have been the "*laissez faire*" scenario that would have reduced radically not only the state support, but also indirectly all the other opportunities of raising funds and increasing income including the wider society.

Taking into account recent trends, the *scenario of state dominance* seems to be very likely as a manifestation of government civil strategy. It means that government will continue supporting the

civil sector, but not generally. As government interest is obviously attached to welfare services and social problem solving, in this scenario those civil organisations are preferred by the state that can substitute public services, or at least can contribute in solving public sector crises and shortages. Recent trends refer to this way of development, and obvious signs of falling apart and polarization can be seen. In the year of 2000 5,4% of the non-profit organisations (public foundations, public law associations and public benefit companies) got the 40 % of the total state support (www.nonprofit.hu). The state dominance scenario is characteristic of strong state influence, selection on the basis of state aims, ignorance of non state friendly organisations.

The scenario of partnership can be another way of developing civil society policy. According to this model there is a strong, relatively equalised partner relationship between civil society and the state. They form a diverse co-operation for searching and meeting needs of the society, elaborate and realize social policy together. The framework of this partnership - based on common interest – must be completed by the general and consistent system of regulations that will not hurt civil independence (Kuti 1998). A positive NGO-government relationship in the transitional process is a prerequisite if it is to be consolidated and developed.

Experts also referred to the ambivalent and opposite symptoms of existing civil organisations. On one hand they can prove, sometimes, effective achievements in active citizenship, but on the other hand they show how civil organisations commit themselves to politics and business, and how civil activity can be used as a stepping stone. Consequently, it is no wonder that people distrust in civil organisations, and do not believe in their real effectiveness and legitimacy. These facts discourage true active citizenship.

There are good examples of Civil Roundtables, but there are a lot of bad examples as well. When civic groups fight with each other and lose their independence, the „Divide et impera” principle is often practised.

A member of local government (and parallel leader of a local civil organisation) explained:

“The number of active citizens is rather small. In the political arena we are on the way toward a bipartite system. Smaller political parties are less and less interested in civil issues. On the other hand both the biggest parties try to reach for the civil world by offering financial support. Consequently the civil sector has also divided into political groups and created enemies.”

So, besides the specific government policy we can also mention the overwhelming influence of political parties on civil organisations. Party influence by virtue of direct and indirect support slowly and unnoticeably creates unconditionally loyal circles of NGO-s in the vicinity of all important parties.

At an analytical level, this deficiency reflects the general insecurity and low self-confidence of the entire civil sphere that has not yet come to terms with its role as a democratic control mechanism and promoter of initiatives.

Civil society in Hungary is not only heavily dependent on the state, and in particular on state financing, but its actors are personally attached to state institutions. The average collaborator of a civil organization has taken or will take public office at some point in her or his life, or does the two simultaneously. It can end up in an uncomfortable situation where their distinct functions and loyalties cannot be reconciled. Another, even more important consequence is the frailty of civil enterprises that often only legitimise the products of the State's political window-dressing, instead of exposing them to social criticism.

Concerning the reasons of civil inactivity in Hungary the very first and very often mentioned reason of the lack for civil activity is the **poor situation of citizens' social-economic circumstances**.

„This was largely due to the economic burden imposed by the collapse of state socialism, which drastically affected the living standards and prospects of the society, especially its less privileged members/strata. As a result, most people's perception of political change was the heavy burden of economic restructuring. Benefits of democratic transition: growth of civil society, freedom of speech, participation in political and social movements, etc., appeared as secondary.”

“In the present economic situation wages are so low, that most of the people are engaged only in keeping body and soul together and nothing more.”

Effectiveness is not only determined by capability of good and sound methodological work, but it is greatly affected by the level of adequate conditions and resources. For example, the Association of Community Developers, managed to develop good quality training modules, can offer a residential training centre and a learning environment for acquiring meaningful social experiences, but those in need (average citizens) do not have the time and means to attend. Even if they come up with the monetary resources the potential users do not get permission to leave their workplaces, or gain support from the local government. The Association launched a program to attract university students for a 5 day training seminar, and the University departments were happy but they did not have the means to pay for the students.

Experts also often mentioned the missing of “know how” of active citizenship. Their general opinion is that knowledge and the skills of being active (such as taking risks, solving problems, resolving conflicts, being able to participate and co-operate, being able to communicate and debate, organising team activity, tolerance, etc.) have not developed yet because of specific reasons. Simply we can say that both personal experience and education of active citizenship

have not reached good levels of achievement yet. Both the opportunity of “learning by doing” and the opportunity of “learning by learning” towards better active citizenship are rather poor at the moment.

“Active citizens are not born just like that. People have to learn the skills of being active, so the different scenes of life – such as family, neighbourhood, local community, school, working place, public institutions – can play significant roles in forming personality. Unfortunately most of these influential factors still suffer from democratic deficit, and that is why people do not have too much opportunity to experience the effects of being active citizen.”

A leader of an umbrella association of local civil organisations remarked: “A real innovative initiative – the so-called Civil Round Table – completely went down, because leading roles were taken by those, who jumped into politics in a very short time.”

A former leader of a donating network said: “Outcomes of a recent research on social trust show, that people in trouble turn towards the state rather than towards the civil sphere.”

“When civil organisations step on the way of professionalism, and begin to make money instead of carrying out mission, their legitimacy evaporate.”

The cognitive aspects of active citizenship can not be neglected, but everyone agreed that it is impossible to learn swimming from a book, so practice oriented learning offers realistic chances to learn the necessary skills to become a politically responsible citizen. Democratic skills, attitudes, activity, and mobilisation do not happen overnight, and they need time to ripen and develop into maturity.

It follows from the psychological and cognitive aspects of the concept that active citizenship as a specific activity form is basically a learned behaviour, that comes into existence by virtue of experiential learning processes the most effectively (‘learning by doing’). Values, attitudes, activity patterns, competencies can be developed in the form of practice the best. Consequently, for the development of required civil features there must be a real need towards them within the forming environment. Agents of the social milieu should create favourable climate for being active citizen, and in this respect political powers – state, government, political parties and other authorised political entities - stand above all.

The most effective methods seem to be community work based. Being integrated into local power relations and developing self-organising capacities can result in achieving real outputs which are objectives of the local life, but the process results are equally important; co-operation skills, planning and decision-making community skills, discovery of local identity, and a sense of community. Short term financing usually demands short-term tangible results, which can distort the processes and can produce fabricated-manifested outcomes which are not the real results in the long run.

This is exactly what is happening, and that is a fundamental issue to discuss.

Let's quote Lindeman's thought at the end:

„In democracy one must never expect more than a partial fulfillment of ideals.”⁴ (Education for a New Democratic Era)

⁴ Lindeman, Eduard (1949): Education for a New Democratic Era. In: Brookfield, S.(1987): Learning Democracy: Eduard Lindeman on Adult Education and Social Change. London: Croom Helm