

IN SUPPORT OF INCREASED AND ENHANCED
CIVIC EDUCATION IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA, AND GLOBALLY

Cultivating the Demand Side of Liberal Democracy

The troubling apparent backsliding of liberal norms and practices in 2016 (e.g., Brexit, the tone of the U.S. election campaign and first weeks of the Trump administration, and growing right-wing movements in support of “illiberal democracy”) has highlighted that civic education (instruction on democratic principals and the form and function of government) is lacking in both developing and the more “consolidated” democratic societies alike

It also focused attention on the challenges of liberal democratic transition, demonstrated the non-linear nature of the process and revealed the need for not only robust liberal institutions, but widespread education on liberal norms. A recent piece in *Foreign Policy* highlighted the impact of the challenge in the European arena, focusing on the European Union membership accession process and its failure to recognize the shallow roots of both liberal institutions and norms. Many advocates of reforms, including donors, have been much more likely to support the supply side of reform (establishment of institutions and the rule of law) rather than the demand side (genuine citizen engagement in and support for these structures). While the authors of the *Foreign Policy* piece limit their analysis to trends in Central Europe (Hungary, Poland, Slovakia), their observations are highly relevant to the Western Balkans.

Nationalist Education in Bosnia and Herzegovina

As two people who have been advocating for comprehensive and meaningful education reform in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), and more broadly throughout the former Yugoslavia, for over a decade and a half, seeing the following in print from a new corner and in a new context was validating: “In hindsight, it [the EU] could have pushed harder for direct social change, giving the reform of high school history textbooks or positive on-the-ground outcomes for minorities the same priority as the detailed monitoring accorded to intellectual property, financial services, and veterinary regulations.” Further, the *Foreign Policy* authors note the corrosion of shared civic norms, as nationalist and/or populist politicians promote “mythologized versions of national history through school textbooks or building statues of contentious nationalist ‘heroes.’”

While education has been commonly implemented as a nationalist and

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“nation-building” tool in all the countries of the former Yugoslavia, nowhere has it



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been as damaging and acute as in post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina, where ethnic entrepreneurs have constructed competing notions of citizenship based on exclusive ethno-national and/or religious, rather than civic, identities. The extent to which this experiment has been successful is chilling, as the word “citizen” itself has become a code word to convey fear of the domination of one group over another. Schools are a primary locus for this process. The dominant ethnic “flavor” of a school is often readily apparent, through imagery, the dominant script and the content of hallway displays. Children learn not only diametrically incompatible versions of history which emphasize historical injustice and continuing victimization from irreconcilable textbooks, but near fully separate identity subjects ranging from language to literature to religion to geography that in general contain examples of uncritical, ideological retellings of historical myths. In some of the worst cases this “learning” occurs in schools adorned with photos of – or unabashedly named after – nationalist war criminals.

In such circumstances, a parent who may be offered a job where they would

be in an ethnic minority must seriously consider whether they want to enroll their children in the local school. Children must assimilate to the local majority curriculum or find alternate private transport to one’s “own” school elsewhere. The international community has spent years attempting to eradicate the 50-odd “Two Schools Under One Roof” phenomena that exist in a few locations. The majority of schools in the country teach curricula that leave students at best with little or no knowledge of the ‘other’ citizens of BiH, and at worst prepared to view the other as their adversary.

Repercussions of a Lack of Effective Civic Education

As seen most recently in municipal elections in 2016, or in general elections in 2014, first time voters born after the war did not decisively break with voting trends of the past two decades despite widespread dissatisfaction with educational, social, and economic opportunities; they either mirrored support for the dominant party machines or just stayed home and relinquished their right to participate in the democratic process. While disappointing, this should come as no surprise, as the newest generation of BiH citizens is at a significant disadvantage from their parents: they have no memory of living in a genuinely multinational society where the government works, the garbage is picked up, the schools are equipped and where jobs are available to those who study and not just for those with the right connections. No positive connection exists between the people and the state or public services, and no relationship between those elected and the community. Instead, the dominant public political narratives throughout their lifetime have been the exact opposite of any vision of a shared future.

The kind of civic education needed to reverse this trend remains an elusive dream. It is appreciated by the most committed teachers, but is consistently

under attack from efforts to whittle down civic education class-time (a mere 36 hours throughout nine years of primary education and 72 hours over four years of secondary education). Teachers face an impossible task of developing civic and citizenship skills and values in the face of the many more hours of class-time required for mono-perspective, rote-memorization in identity-focused subjects. Critical thinking, media literacy and the multi-perspectivity skills needed in an increasingly complex world are pipe dreams in a system starved of resources by redundant administrations and dominated by political objectives more than by pedagogical expertise. Moreover, many of the civics curriculum materials utilized are imported from major donor democracies (primarily the US) and are generic and minimally tailored. That more relevant teaching tools have not been developed a full generation after the war reflects the lack of high-level local and international policy support for such an initiative.

To be fair, the events of 2016 have demonstrated that civic education has been woefully ignored, including in established democracies such as the US, where it has very often fallen out of school curricula over the past generation. We contend that the reduction in the quality of civic education and the time devoted to it in such democracies has resulted in the recent backsliding of liberal norms in these countries. It is as if policymakers really did believe the end of the Cold War heralded the end of history, and that democracy would magically flourish on its own; or perhaps policymakers just took the skills for granted. However, democratic norms and principles are not natural, default inclinations; citizens must learn the responsibilities and rights of citizenship, and must apply them in practice in a responsive environment.

Established democracies often need a reminder of why education is an investment in a healthy civic future, and post-war polities need constructive education policies and approaches even more. However, education in BiH has received a mere fraction of the budgetary and expert support that other fields have received. The potentially strongest player in BiH – the EU – has been frustratingly limited in terms of its engagement in education reform, focusing more on technical aspects of educational financing and on Europe-wide student and teacher exchanges, rather than supporting the development of a robust and compulsory civic education program for primary and secondary school students.

In late 2016 BiH received the “question-

naire” consisting of 3,432 questions that must be answered to become a formal EU member candidate. Question #374 states: “Please provide information on measures to prevent ethnicity-based forms of discrimination and segregation in the education system. Are there any relevant court judgments and are they implemented?” Based on two decades of political resistance to providing a genuine education accessible to all stu-



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dents, we expect that the response will include words like “devolved,” “federal,” “unique histories,” and other such turns of phrase that preclude any honest response or reflection. However, serious reflection by the EU when reviewing the answer to this question could help to provide a foundation for long-needed systematic reform in the future.

If the EU continues to approach BiH's accession, and that of its neighbors, as if it is indeed a simple technical process, then it does so at its own peril. Members like Hungary and Poland have provided the Union with unanticipated and unwanted problems, and stand to further weaken EU-wide citizen support for the transnational structure. Bringing in additional weak and minimally functional members will only further erode the state of the Union and its purported values.

Stopping the Backsliding

Neither BiH's political nor educational problems can be addressed unless comprehensive education reform that deals with both the content that children learn (curricula and learning outcomes), and how they learn it, is undertaken. We both have documented dozens of recommendations from teachers, students, and parents alike; the following are just a few related to the critical issue of citizenship education.

First, pedagogy – teaching methods –

needs to be more student-centered and inter-active to promote critical thinking and open minds. Our own research indicates that many teachers and students want such an approach, as they realize the old techniques are not preparing young people for an increasingly complex world. We've often heard a frustrated resignation among teachers who at times even believe that policymakers want a school system that discourages critical thought, as such citizens are less likely to seek to engage, to challenge, or to better the status quo. All teachers should have civic education and the skills required to effectively teach it as part of their university education. In turn, university teacher training faculties will require more support (financial and professional) to produce the next generation of teachers with these skills.

Second, BiH needs more organic civic education materials produced by BiH citizens – teachers, experts, and even student leaders – that address the particularities of the BiH government and opportunities for a real discussion about the relationship between the government and the governed. In-class policy discussions and debates need to focus on issues that students see in their everyday lives (lack of sufficient school facilities, air pollution, youth emigration, nepotism, etc.).

Finally, more time than currently allocated must be specifically marked for instruction on democratic principles. Initiatives to cut the time spent on civics education – or to integrate such modules into other courses (“if you want to lose it, diffuse it”) – will result in an even weaker sense of civic belonging and agency. While student-centered teaching techniques can be applied to all subjects, our research suggests that those schools that spend the least time on civic education do in fact demonstrate the weakest results.

Students will become voters and thus need civic education to learn how to question what they see around them – what they read in the news, what they hear from a political leader and what they hear second-hand on the bus. Rumor, bombast and outright lies all played a part in laying the groundwork for the war that tore Yugoslavia apart over 20 years ago. This kind of (dis)information campaign was necessary to ensure the military campaign could follow. Citizens everywhere need to be prepared and be able to counter such manipulation. The experiences of those countries that suffered from the illiberal practices at the end of the 20th century should serve as a lesson to the West of the wisdom of taking pre-emptive action to resist these dangerous trends.