

CIVIC

Dangerous word

By: Daliborka Uljarević

Although apparently innocent, the cancellation of a debate competition for high-school students is a symbolic and illustrative example of how the spirit of youth, which promises that everything is possible if you take action and try hard, is subject to systematic dilutions and mortifications in this country.

Not long ago, I was happy to receive an invitation from a sixteen year old participant in our *Democracy School* to be a member of the jury in a debate competition taking place in a gymnasium in Podgorica. I felt it was somehow a small success for CEE whose programme perhaps inspired this young man to become more active in his own community.

After our oral agreement, he sent me an e-mail containing a brilliantly written project with a detailed scenario of the programme, exuding enthusiasm and commitment one always has for these first, grand projects – projects that we all perhaps had at a certain stage of our growing-up, and the memory of which long after stirs up powerful emotions.

A few days later he called me up to say that the school told him that the competition cannot take place in February, as planned earlier, because of the upcoming parliamentary elections.

What do elections have to do with a high-school debate competition?

In any other, normal, country – none. But since this sense of normality does not inhibit this society, consequently here is normal to tighten every pore of the system ahead of the elections, lest some dangerous words should ooze out of the building where Civic Education exists as a subject and go rampant around town. The objective of this subject is exactly to develop social and moral responsibility, motivate young people to participate in the life of their communities and make them politically literate, enabling them to be a part of a modern democracy.

Evidently, it is impossible for a subject like that to exist in isolation, nor can we expect it to bear fruit if the environment does not provide respect for different opinions and discourages individuals from becoming really active. The schools, in partnership with other institutions, should play the primary role in helping their students to develop their abilities and critical thinking, to educate them about their rights and responsibilities as citizens and how to use them in practice.

But the gymnasium of Podgorica, a school financed from the public budget (that's the coffer that contains the money of all of us, regardless of our political, religious or other affiliation) prefers to rein in their students and discourage those who try to introduce some novelties, motivate their peers, raise their heads.

"But we're only 16! What can our words do to these elections?" was the resigned comment of this young student. Mine, more cynical, was that such backward methods are administered to them precisely so that when they are 20 they will not even dream of doing something perhaps even more subversive, like organising a protest to protect their rights. That's how our schools see their preventive role...

Instead of promoting tolerance, dialogue, cooperation and argumented discussion in every aspect of their school life, making the civic and democratic principles an inherent part of the value systems of their students and the basis for their future participation in the society – as they are supposedly bound to do by their regulations and statutes – our schools reproduce party divisions among their staff and students, and their teachers often subordinate the standards of their profession to political calculations.

"Adults in the school ought to contribute to the promotion of democratic values, skills and behaviour", states the Strategy for Civic Education in primary and secondary schools in Montenegro for the period 2007-2010. The document of the Government. It is as binding for the professors and their superiors as the basic morality is for the directors of bankrupt state enterprises to refrain from ruining their companies further by paying themselves enormous severance packages and perks for memberships in the managing boards.

This is why Montenegro lacks a developed culture of protest or even minimum discourse about such issues, which is one of the roots of all problems we are facing today. Real transformations happen to others, we only perform faded replicas in the guise of "exported anti-bureaucratic revolutions", whose bitter results we still experience today.

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Feđa, the sixteen year old from the beginning of this article, does not have this opportunity to share his first big disappointment with the institutions that ought to be there for him and not against him. But he will always remember it, like we all remember our first successes and failures even if in retrospect we find them minor and negligible compared to the later ones. It is my honour to do this instead of him and his classmates, because I hope this will be an encouragement for them not to give up.

Instead of conclusion, I would like to put together here the two key elements of the story: the personal and the collective, to complete the circle that began once, long ago, with a lecture at the Faculty of Political Science in Belgrade given by the esteemed professor **Podunavac**, whose account of Antigone reminded us all that civic disobedience is not only a collective, but deeply individual category. This is our opportunity, our power and responsibility.

Some high-school students know this. Do you?

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