

Wojciech Starzyński

The Role of European Parents Association in Building Civic Societies in European Countries

Role of EPA in building civic societies in European countries with special consideration of the STO contribution to the system transformation in Poland and other post-communistic countries of Central and Eastern Europe

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Building civic societies that are aware of their rights (but also aware of their responsibilities), which results from their belonging to the national European state or even world community, constitutes the basis of the democratic system. Without enlightened citizens that understand these issues and without the feeling of mutual interconnections that obligate us all to social solidarity there can be no democracy, or sooner or later it becomes distorted.

Taking the above considerations into account, one must joyfully welcome the year 2005 that has been announced the Year of Civic Education and due to this undertake a number of tasks that will get us closer to the ideal of a citizen and a civic state.

We are happy that Poland is one of the organizers of such endeavors. Poland is a country which during many centuries, and especially during the last 25 years, has given other countries of Europe and the World an example of how to fight for human rights. Poland has also recognized that civic education is necessary to establish a democratic law abiding country.

The subject of our meeting is the role of non-governmental organizations in the development of civic education. It is a truism to state that it is organizations, foundations and other forms of citizen associations that create the foundations of democracy and that these institutions are the best propagators and creators of civic education. There are tens of thousands of such institutions in Poland and in Europe.

If we look at the map of different non-governmental organizations and different groups of people participating in them, we can easily see that the parents are the most numerous group. Special attention must be paid to them, because:

- the parents constitute a large group which must be taught civic behavior

first and which often wants to participate in public life actively, but does not always know how,

- the parents are the first and most important educators of their children, educators of the next generation, which must be brought up to face the challenges of the 21st century, be prepared for democracy, for living in a civic country and for serving this country.

The European Parents Association, which was established in the 80s of 20th century, assembled different parental organizations representing European Union Member States under its wings. In 1993, as a result of the initiative and activity of Polish Civic Education Association (Spoleczne Towarzystwo Oswiatowe), EPA opened itself for other countries from outside the EU and accepted them on equal rights, for example organizations from Poland, Norway and Slovakia. Currently in EPA there are approximately 45 national or regional associations that assemble parents from the majority of countries of the extended EU.

The execution of a number of programs which make it possible to extend the influence of parents on schools and their children, exchange of ideas and experiences between parents from European countries, representing parents in various European institutions and presenting their demands and expectations concerning the right to participate in taking the decisions regarding national educational systems can be considered the most important achievements of EPA. The establishment and continuation of the Alcuin award contest for the best civic initiative for many years should also be noted. This contest allows to present a number of very interesting educational activities run by the parents.

Summarizing, one can say that thanks to EPA the parents from different countries of our continent integrated and got to know each other and the charter of rights and responsibilities of parents accepted by the EU authorities was developed, but most important of all tens of thousands of parents and their organizations acting for the development of democratic solutions in educational systems of European countries became active.

It might seem that in the light of these experiences and achievements a special role was played by the STO (Spoleczne Towarzystwo Oswiatowe - Civic Educational Association), the first and biggest association of parents and teachers from the Central and Eastern European countries breaking away from the totalitarian communistic system and through great pains joining the free and democratic nations of Europe. The STO was established in 1987 and greatly contributed to break the state (communistic at that time) monopoly in the field of education, from creating a strong, non-public education sector in Poland, making the Parliament accept a number of legal solutions enabling the establishment and operation of alternative forms of education and upbringing, to providing tens of thousands of children with the possibility to obtain knowledge based on the most novel achievements of world science.

One of the most important achievements of the STO (Spoleczne Towarzystwo Oswiatowe - Civic Educational Association) is the consequent actions for developing a wide front of parents in the state education system. It was among others from our initiative that the entries giving parents and their representatives some influence on the school and their children were made in Polish educational law. These solutions have been

accepted until now, although often quite distant from European standards moved Polish educational law closer to the solutions functioning in most democratic countries. We organized a number of conferences for parents, including international conferences with the participation of parents from former communistic countries, and developed common principles of educational policy. As a result of the initiative undertaken by the STO a book, unique on the Polish and most likely European level, has been published. The title of this book is "Rights of parents at school". It contains a compendium of knowledge necessary for widely understood civic activity of the community. It must be stressed that all these activities were observed with great kindness and supported by the Commissioner for Civil Rights Protection, who stated many times that the right of the parents to decide on the shape of the school is a natural and a non-negotiable issue. If in 2005 one can say that Polish school system and Polish educational system are close to the systems of senior EU Member States, then this is the work of the STO and Polish parents.

At the end please note that the STO (Spoleczne Towarzystwo Oswiatowe - Civic Educational Association) shared and will share its experience with the parents from the countries breaking away from the totalitarian system only now. We have maintained contact with organizations from Russia, parents in Belarus and Ukraine, we have cooperated with parents from Austria, Greece, Slovakia and Lithuania for many years now. One of the results of this cooperation was the acceptance of Szczecin Declaration in 2003 in which parents from Greece, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia and Ukraine declared the will to undertake common action in order to:

1. return the proper place and importance to the values fundamental in education, such as: dignity of beauty, friendship, dialog and humanity,
2. care for these values in everyday life of schools and families, and also build relations between teachers and parents, between home and school,
3. develop international forms of cooperation between parents, students and teachers,
4. bring the valuable Central and Easter Europeans traditions and culture to the united Europe,
5. increase the importance of education and strengthen the autonomy of schools and positions of teachers and parents in countries and communities of united Europe.

Summarizing, one can clearly state that there is no democratic Europe, no civic societies and no countries without the wide involvement and activity of millions of parents. European Year of Civic Education is also in a large part the European Year of Parents.