



THE IDEA AND PRACTISE OF EUROPEAN SCHOOL CLUBS (ESC)

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A good European citizen should be «a person of unblemished democratic convictions and attitudes, who is firmly embedded in his or her national polis but holds equally strong views on the solidarity of European citizens. Furthermore, this person is not just thinking about European solidarity and connectedness, but he/she actively practises those virtues. He/she participates in local, national, and European politics by, above all, casting his/her vote in elections»¹. We know that we are far from reaching this ideal. Even worse, as the vice-president of the European Commission, Margot Wallström, wrote in the last issue of this magazine, at present «seven out of ten citizens say that they know very little about the UE»².

The European Institutions are using all possible media (books, brochures, TV, radio, newspapers, and, of course, Internet³) to communicate their work as well as the fundamental ideas of the European Union. By this, they have already reached remarkable improvements, but as Commissioner Wallström put it: «Schools are, of course, the obvious place in which to start learning about Europe»⁴. A perfect extra-curricular tool to do so are *European School Clubs*.

The European School Clubs (ESC) work like any ordinary club at school, like a football, chess or dance club, with the significant difference that the students and teachers are discussing and working exclusively on European matters. Compared to the top-down initiatives of the Commission or the Parliament, they are a sort of European grass roots movement. Whilst in some countries there are only a few clubs inspired by the special engagement of single teachers, there are other countries like Italy or Poland with hundreds and thousands of ESC all over the country from basic to upper secondary and vocational schools. In Poland, there are by now more than 3000 clubs⁵. And they can tell a story of success.

The Polish ESC are said to have largely contributed to the change of opinion in Poland in favour of the

European Union. Because not only are the students and teachers involved, but their friends and families, too. By direct contact to such motivated European citizens get to know more about the ideas and the functioning of the European Union. Still, ESC are not limited to the European Union, you will find them at schools in partner states like Croatia, Serbia, Ukraine or Turkey as well.

In general, the clubs are organised by one or two responsible teachers starting up a club in their school. Depending on age and number of pupils participating, the organisation of the club can be partly or completely delegated to the students. This way, they can learn active citizenship and democratic rules by organising the clubs on their own. The students elect a president or a presidency for the club for one term or the whole school year. Maybe it's even possible to get them a special room in the school for meetings and where working materials can be kept. It's up to the presidency to date and organise the meetings, to propose topics and schedules. What is finally done within the following weeks and months is discussed and voted by all members of the club. The role of the teacher is restricted to support the students in their work as far as necessary. By this democratic way of organisation, ESC are learning-by-doing democracy, so are they not only contributing in educating «good European citizens» but they are also getting close to the ideal of cosmopolitan citizens defined by the UNESCO framework⁶.

One of the main tasks of ESC is to bring Europe into school. So, the organisation of a Europe Day within the first two weeks of May⁷ can be a fine activity to start a club. All you need is a small core group at your own school. There are a lot of regional, national and European initiatives and competitions to take part in. Just to give you some examples of possible activities:

You may...

- ... invite a member of EP (European Parliament) to your school and organise a panel discussion.
- ... prepare a small exhibition in your school about the functioning of the European institutions or any actual or basic European topic, as e.g. the independence of Kosovo, the energy policy or the enlargement of the Union.
- ... work on the migration policy of your school's town or region. As highlight of your club work, one can organise a visit of your regional, national parliament or a trip to one of the European institutions in Brussels, Strasbourg or Luxembourg.
- ... also prepare a European party in your school with music and dances or a European dinner with food from all over our continent. It doesn't always have to be only about institutions and politics.

Certainly, working on European matters does also mean bringing people together, exchanging ideas and creating links all across Europe. Surprisingly, initiatives to create networks between the existing ESC are a relatively recent development. The advantages of such networks are obvious: You can work on the same topic and discuss it with respect to different regional and national points of view. Modern ICT-tools allow you to get and stay in touch for just a project or on the long run. You can organise a chat or a video-conference to discuss or even create a virtual exhibition together. With *eTwinning*⁸, there is a European tool which enables you to find partners for your projects and offers you a virtual space (called «twinspace») to work with. For pupils and students of all ages, it is always a special event to get in direct contact with young people of the same age from other countries. In addition, it's a good training for their foreign language skills as they are communicating in authentic situations.

The first, and, as far as I know, biggest network of ESC was created two years ago by the Polish Robert Schuman-Foundation. The foundation is in contact with more than 1000 clubs in Poland and so far, there are 27 international clubs registered, mainly from Italy and Romania⁹. The foundation runs a special website¹⁰ with practical information for ESC as new competitions, a project database, a mailing list and different offers for participation. They are also providing a regular newsletter. Once a year, in autumn, the Polish Schuman-Foundation is organising an international meeting of European School Clubs in Poland. The euroclubnetwork.eu is open to all interested clubs from Europe. Inscription is possible on the homepage mentioned above.

Another co-operating network was also founded at the end of 2007. A group of teachers created a virtual platform on *eTwinning*. This peer-to-peer Internet platform consists of a forum, a chat-room, webspace for up-/downloads, photo-galleries and other possibilities. Registration and membership are free of charge. Teachers are using the ESC-«twinspace» to exchange ideas, teaching materials and to create a direct communication and co-operation between the clubs all over Europe¹¹.

All in all, the idea of European School Clubs shows a huge potential for the future. Until now, the practise doesn't seem to be completely developed. The main initiative runs from the new member states (except Italy), where a lot of clubs have been created since 2000. It is now about time to spread this grass roots school movement all over Europe, so that in the nearest future we can see more clubs from Spain to Finland, connecting schools, teachers and, above all, pupils and students from all European countries to discuss the important matters of our community and to make Europe their own.

NOTES

¹ Ute FREVERT, «How to become a good European citizen: present challenges and past experiences», in Viola B. GEORGI (ed.), *The Making of Citizens in Europe: New Perspectives on Citizenship Education*. Berlin, 2008, p. 41.

² *Ibid.*, p. 36.

³ For example the information site of the Commission: www.europa.eu, of the EP www.europarl.europa.eu or the video information channel on youtube www.youtube.com/eutube.

⁴ Margot WALLSTRÖM, «Let's talk about Europe», *Pliegos de Yuste*, 7-8, 2008, p. 37.

⁵ Information by the Polish Robert Schuman-Foundation http://schuman.org.pl/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=208&Itemid=114&lang=en.

⁶ Audrey OSLER and Hugh STARKEY, «Education for Cosmopolitan Citizenship», in Viola B. GEORGI (ed.), *The Making of Citizens in Europe: New Perspectives on Citizenship Education*. Berlin, 2008, p. 210.

⁷ Around the 9th of May remembering the Schuman Declaration of 1950. On European level you'll find the Spring Day initiative as annual campaign, for further information see <http://www.springday2009.net>.

⁸ Twinning is part of the European Comenius-program. It's working in 23 languages and involves 30 countries, the countries of the EU plus Norway, Iceland, Turkey. For more information see www.etwinning.net.

⁹ Numbers at the end of April 2009, see <http://www.euroclubnetwork.eu/content/blogcategory/14/41/>.

¹⁰ See www.euroclubnetwork.eu. The euroclubnetwork.eu is open to all interested clubs from Europe. Inscription is possible on the website mentioned above.

¹¹ If you are interested in joining the network, please contact Daniel Eisenmenger by e-mail on [daniel.eisenmenger\(at\)etwinning.de](mailto:daniel.eisenmenger(at)etwinning.de).