

UKRAINIAN NATIONAL CONFERENCE ON CIVICS EDUCATION: A CHALLENGE FOR UKRAINIAN UNIVERSITIES

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Ukrainian universities and pedagogical institutes have a key role to play in promoting Ukraine's democratic development at a critical moment in the nation's history. The time for introducing democratic concepts the rule of law, human rights, minority rights, the nature of political parties and elections, and the history and meaning of democracy - across Ukraine has come. Currently a new draft law on education awaits approval in the Supreme Rada. In the meantime, partly because of reduced state funding and state control of the schools, curricular initiatives in all fields of study have by necessity fallen to local teachers, including those in the new schools, the gymnasias. Finally, western educational foundations are stepping forward to aid Ukraine's educational system because of the recognition that education is central to building and sustaining democracy in the minds and hearts of the next generation.

One possibility would be a national conference on civics education to strengthen the links between higher education and the secondary schools on teaching democracy. At this conference Ukrainian educators would present information that teachers and pedagogical institutes could take back with them to the local districts. The effort could be done in concert with European and North American universities that already are at work on ways to teach democratic concepts special from kindergarten through the twelfth grade, either in separate courses or in modules within courses. University representatives would assess the need for education in democracy in Ukraine (to be presented at the conference, preferably at the opening session) and conduct presentations on Ukraine's needs in the fields of curriculum development, teacher training, and new textbooks and teaching materials.

A second objective of the proposed conference would be to bring Ukrainian educators at all levels together who have initiated civics education programs, but have little contact to date with each other.

The difficulties facing the teaching profession are many, including the weakening of ties with colleagues in other countries of the FSU, the "brain drain" due to abysmal salaries and deteriorating facilities, and the absence of textbooks and up-to-date reference materials on all subjects. This situation in turn compels an extraordinary response on the part of the Ministry of Education and university officials. A conference on civics education might lead to the creation of a civics education association at the national and regional levels to disseminate conference results, to translate existing foreign language materials into Ukrainian for use in the schools, and to provide possible future contacts for western organisations supporting Ukrainian civics education. The groundwork for continued research and collaboration with western institutes and libraries will have been laid.

Finally, universities and pedagogical institutes would be charged with the development of suitable textbooks for secondary school use, including, quite possibly, a textbook for a separate civics course for high school students. They might also consider ways to "lobby" the Ministry of Education and the Supreme Rada to make civics education mandatory within the schools. If successful a civics education curriculum - in effect a new value system for Ukrainian children would begin to emerge to replace the defunct Manrism-Leninism.

Conference Organisation

The actual conference - a weeklong meeting in Kiev in late 1996 or early 1997 - will focus on four main topics:

1. Assessing the Need for Education for Democracy in Ukraine
2. How to Build an Education for Democracy Curriculum
3. The Role of the Teacher, Teacher Trainer, and School Administrator in Education for Democracy
4. Development and Use of New Materials to Teach Democracy

These topics will be presented in various ways, from panel discussions to demonstration sessions to small working groups. Presenters will be drawn from North American and Western and Eastern Europe. The emphasis of the presenters will be hands-on and practical; that is, the goal of most sessions at the conference will be to give Ukrainian teachers and educators information which they can take back with them to the classroom and to local school districts and regions. The conference language will be Ukrainian (and/or Russian as decided), with simultaneous translation into English.