

Annette Freyberg-Inan with Radu Cristescu

**The Ghosts in Our Classrooms, or:
John Dewey Meets Ceaușescu**

The Promise and the Failures of Civic Education in Romania

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Frontcover Picture: Students from three different countries in the region engaged in political debate at the Balkan Debate Forum in Timișoara, Romania, organized by the Civic Education Project in May 2001. © Annette Freyberg-Inan

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Preface

The two authors of this book used to be teacher and student. It has become difficult to say who is which, and writing this book has continued to blur the picture. For making this experience possible we have a number of people to thank.

Too numerous to be listed by name, we want to thank all members of the Civic Education Project, who have been working relentlessly and skillfully in many of the world's less popular locations to instill the spirit and pass on the skills of democratic citizenship. The circumstances under which they work are often extremely challenging. Their achievements are out of all proportion with their limited resources.

We also thank the students who are taking part in this endeavor. Every teacher knows that there are few things more rewarding than sensing the potential for human growth and empowerment that can be tapped and encouraged in the classroom. Realizing this potential is a communal effort, and without the good will of students nothing goes. We wish to thank in particular those students with whom we have worked over the years. They know who they are.

We also need to thank those influential individuals who have recognized the importance of civic education for creating sustainable democracy. George Soros has been wise and generous. Gratitude is also due many other supporters and organizations working around the world for education for democracy.

Last not least, some names must be singled out: We want to thank Marina Tătărâm, Oana Suciu, Mihaela Mihai, and Leonard Ioniță for valuable information and feedback delivered during the preparation of this book. In addition, we want to thank our many interview partners, who are listed in the References section.

The writing of this book has been an exercise in democratic deliberation. We do not see eye to eye on a great many aspects of political and eco-

nomic organization. Still we have found it easy to agree on what we have written in this book. That is a hopeful sign, as we do not want to deliver a blueprint for societal organization or a policy manual. This book is aimed at the empowerment of every democrat, independent of particular agendas. It is about creating framework conditions. The rest is open.

Annette Freyberg-Inan and Radu Cristescu
Amsterdam and London, November 2005

1 Introduction

1.1 Why Study Civic Education in Romania?

To understand why this book was written and how the authors became familiarized with its topic, we should begin with some autobiographical background. The first author was born in Germany in 1970 and passed through the German education system until she had obtained Master's degrees in English and Political Science. She then completed a PhD in Political Science in the United States of America. In early 1999, with her PhD degree fresh in hand, she moved to Bucharest. For one and a half years she worked off and on as a consultant for the UN Resident Coordinator System in Romania. During that time, unavoidably, she also became curious about Romanian politics and, combining her academic training with her experiences in the field, began writing about what she could see of Romania's political evolution in the chaotic years since the 1989 revolution. In summer 2000 she began work as a Visiting Lecturer in Political Science at several Bucharest-based institutions of higher learning. For three years she worked for and through an international NGO called the Civic Education Project (CEP), which is part of the Open Society NGO Network financed mainly through the Soros Foundation. The aim of the Open Society Network, which takes its name and much of its organizational philosophy from Karl Popper's vision of the *Open Society*,¹ is to aid in the evolution towards liberal democracy of societies emerging from repressive regimes (particularly from communism). The specific task of the Civic Education Project within this network has been to help with the reform of advanced social science education, broadly conceived, to make such education compatible with and to allow it to contribute to the development of a democratic civil society. The project is "rooted in the belief that democratic society requires critically minded and informed individuals" and therefore "works to enhance the development of higher and professional education in societies

¹ Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (London: Routledge, 2002 [1945]).

engaged in political and economic transition.”² The Visiting Lecturer Program is one of several initiatives the CEP has run over the years. Other programs seek to help with the repatriation of local faculty committed to reform and to support them in their efforts.

Between the years 2000 and 2003 Annette Freyberg-Inan taught at the Political Science Faculty of the University of Bucharest (5 semesters), at the National School for Political and Administrative Sciences (1 semester), and at the Invisible College Bucharest (4 semesters). Her two main tasks as a CEP Visiting Lecturer were 1.) to teach various subjects in the field of Political Science the way she had been trained to teach them in Germany and the US, thus familiarizing students with the subject matter as well as the range of ways of thinking about it that characterize the discipline in developed democracies; and 2.) to work with local colleagues to develop curricula and academic practices (such as evaluating students' work, evaluating faculty performance, and enforcing standards of academic honesty on both sides) to achieve greater congruence with international academic standards. The core underlying idea was that both the critical and constructive thinking about societal challenges as taught by the social sciences and the experience of a free and fair education that can foster such critical and constructive thinking are indispensable to foster the civic mindset and intellectual skills conducive to the development and consolidation of democracy in a post-totalitarian context.

The second author of this book is a Romanian, born in 1979. Educated in Romania, he had the questionable privilege of starting school in 1986, during the most gruesome period of the Ceaușescu regime. After having been a member of the Communist youth organization, the Pioneers (in kindergarten he had been one of the Motherland's Falcons), he threw his Detachment Commander's stripes to the ground in December 1989 (a time when everyone was throwing something, not always to the ground) and started an academic career in freedom. Graduating in Political and Moral Philosophy at the Department of Philosophy of the University of Bucharest in 2002 and obtaining an MA at the same institution one year later, he became involved in the

² Civic Education Project, *Annual Report July 1, 1998 - June 30, 1999* (New Haven: CEP, 2000), p. 5.

Invisible College Bucharest, an alternative inter-disciplinary and research-oriented academic training program run by the Romanian Society for Political Science.³ His involvement in this institution became a decisive experience, since here he encountered for the first time the benefits of student-centered, small-scale and highly interactive higher education. He is currently continuing his academic training at the University College London and has also complemented it with practical experience working in a Bucharest-based political think tank.

First and second author met in 2001 at the Invisible College, where they cooperated in a research project designed to answer the question “what democracy means to Romanians.”⁴ The results of the survey conducted in the context of this project were hardly encouraging. Large percentages of the citizens from all walks of life we polled were uninformed about what democracy can and should mean, cynical about their own “real existing democracy,” and likely to associate with the term either everything good under the sun, or everything bad, depending on the circumstances of their initial exposure to the concept. While we do not assume the right to tell people what they should be wanting for themselves or for their country, it became clear that many had a poor grasp of any model of democracy, even while expressing strong support for the general concept, and that their vast majority had much to learn about how the political system of which they are a part can be practically improved, even as they found such improvements a dire necessity. It thus became clear that the citizens required knowledge before being able to form part of the new system and in order to be empowered as actors within it.

The relevance of our presenting this autobiographical background at the outset has been two-fold. First, our assessment of the promise and the failures of civic education in Romania is of course partially an assessment of the hopes and challenges, successes and set-backs the first author has met with

³ For more information about the Romanian Society of Political Science see its website: <http://www.srsp.ro/>. For more information about the activities of the Invisible College Bucharest, now unfortunately defunct due to lack of funding and manpower, see <http://www.srsp.ro/ic.htm>.

⁴ Doina Căjvăneanu, Radu Cristescu, Sergiu Lujanschi, and Annette Freyberg-Inan, *Progress Report*, Invisible College, Academic Year 2001-2002, Research Project “What Does Democracy Mean to Romanians?” June 2002.

during her own work in the country. To “do” civic education in Romania has been her job, and the experiences collected by herself and the very many people she has worked with in Romania form a large part of the data on which our assessment draws.⁵ Second, our backgrounds in political science, in particular in the discipline's sub-fields of international relations, comparative politics, and political theory, and in political philosophy with an emphasis on economic theory, respectively, explain the meanings we attach to the development of civic education in the larger context of the post-communist transformation of Romania. Radu Cristescu's work in particular is characterized by a strong theoretical focus on the inter-relationship between institutions and behavior. In the context of Romania's transition, in which we expect both institutional frameworks and patterns of political behavior to change fundamentally, this interaction is crucial and can only be usefully understood as a two-way process: While institutional change alone is unlikely to lead to sustainable changes in patterns of political behavior, it is needed to support such changes. In turn, appropriate behavioral patterns are required to enable the performance of new institutional designs in the long run.

Annette Freyberg-Inan has studied Romania's transformation since 1989 holistically, taking into account a complex variety of societal changes. The development of citizen education is only one of three main (and inter-related) factors impinging on the democratization of Romania that she has looked at more closely in her work. The other two are the country's transnationalization (including its integration into the European Union) and its economic transformation. The effects on democratization of all three factors can be studied through the focal lens of their effects on citizen autonomy:⁶ Civic

⁵ See also Annette Freyberg-Inan, “How Teaching Matters: A View from Romania,” paper presented at the International Studies Association, Annual Conference, Chicago, 2001; *idem*, “Innenansichten einer Disziplin im Wandel: Politikwissenschaft in Rumänien,” in Andreas Umland (ed.), *Geistes- und Sozialwissenschaftliche Hochschullehre in Osteuropa III* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, forthcoming); and Annette Freyberg-Inan, “Country Report Romania” and “International Cooperation: Synthesis Report,” in *The East European Social Sciences: Research Conditions and the Role of Information/Communication*. IZ-Arbeitsbericht 33 (Berlin: GESIS, 2004).

⁶ David Held's principle of democratic autonomy, which will be further explained in the next chapter, forms a central concept in our understanding of democracy. See David Held, *Models of Democracy*, 2nd edn. (London: Polity Press, 1997).

education can build citizen autonomy. It is specifically designed to do so, but its praxis faces many obstacles in Romania today, which are discussed in this book. Transnationalization threatens citizen autonomy *if*, as today, it goes ahead without a proportionate democratization of the transnational realm. Economic transformation as it has occurred in Romania, that is market liberalization, undermines the citizen autonomy of the losers from the process (by systematically reducing their opportunities) and undermines citizen autonomy in general inasmuch as plutocratic power structures emerge. These power structures are today increasingly transnational in nature, linking together the threats transnationalization and economic restructuring pose for citizen autonomy and, thus, for democracy.⁷

Romania is affected by all the problems we have just so very briefly mentioned. In this book, however, we want to emphasize the role of education and explore the obstacles that exist in the country to using education for the sake of democratic emancipation and the establishment of citizen autonomy. We will show how, instead of reforming them, educational structures and practices frequently reflect and recreate the shortcomings of Romanian political culture and structures (for example through corruption in the education sector). The motivation of this book is of course not just to criticize but to show how actors both inside and outside Romania can improve the effectiveness of the process of civic education in the country. Two general considerations have guided the style in which this book is written. First, it is meant to be

⁷ Publications exploring related aspects of Romania's transition are, for example: Annette Freyberg-Inan and Otto Holman, "Painful Integration or Not So Splendid Isolation? Downsides of European Integration in the Context of Romania's Double Transformation," *Romanian Journal of Society and Politics*, Vol. 5, No. 1, 2005, pp. 93-145; Annette Freyberg-Inan with Valentin Budău, Radu Cristescu, Leonard Ioniță, Ionuț Sterpan, and Valentin Vasilescu, "Romania and the IMF: The Effects of IMF Support on Economic and Social Policy in a Transition Country," *Romanian Journal of Society and Politics*, Vol. 3, No. 2, 2003, pp. 130-184; Annette Freyberg-Inan, "Which Way to Progress? The Impact of International Organizations in Romania," in Ronald Linden (ed.), *Norms and Nannies: The Impact of International Organizations on the Central and East European States* (Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), pp. 129-164; and Annette Freyberg-Inan with Andrei OGREZEANU, "Policy Transnationalization in Southeast Europe: The Case of Romania's Progress towards EU Accession," paper presented at the International Studies Association, Annual Conference, Montreal, Canada, 2004.

generally accessible and therefore tries to avoid academic jargon and excessive theorizing and references to other literature. Second, it does not shy away from being at times provocative. The goal of drawing attention to the shortcomings and risks related to civic education in Romania and the need to improve on or address them in our opinion warrant a certain extent of whistleblowing. At the same time, we have done our best not to attack anyone personally and to substantiate concrete criticisms and accusations with evidence, in order to provide not only a provocative but also a fair picture of the state of affairs of civic education in Romania.

1.2 How This Book Is Designed

This book basically moves from theory to observations to recommendations. The next chapter introduces the state of knowledge about why and how education matters for democracy. These questions will be answered in the first section of chapter 2 by drawing on the classical work of John Dewey, among others, and summarizing the insights of the fairly extensive theoretical and empirical literature on the connections between education and democracy which has evolved in its wake. This literature has one shortcoming, however. It is focused heavily on individuals as the recipients of education and the building blocks of democratic society. While they undoubtedly are, social science prompts us to recognize that the whole of society is more than the sum of its parts. Relevant for the relationship between education and democracy are not only the effects of education on individuals as societal agents but also its effects on collectivities and their perceptions of and behavior in the political context. When we consider these more sociological as opposed to strictly psychological dynamics, we can see that education and democracy are theoretically linked through the concept of civil society. This concept tries to capture what sort of citizens (individuals as social beings), forming which sort of society among them, are needed for democracy as a model of social organization to function properly.

Many readers might have heard of the work of Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba, who in the 1960s examined different types of democratic societies

having more or less successfully left behind traditionalist autocratic in favor of modernist liberal democratic cultures.⁸ Or of the work of Robert Putnam, whose study of the question which kinds of civic traditions best support democratic organization (and market economy) set loose an avalanche of work on the importance of associational vibrancy and “social capital” for democratic political culture.⁹ This sort of scholarly work has had an enormous impact on the societies emerging from communism after 1989, Romania included, because it helped create a wide consensus that transition to democracy could be supported by stimulating non-governmental associational activity, leading to an explosion of (usually foreign-funded) NGOs (including the Open Society Network itself) throughout the region in the 1990s. The second section of chapter 2 will therefore discuss the role of the concept of civil society in the theory of democracy to complete the theoretical groundwork for the empirical analysis of chapter 3, which will deal with both the psychological and the sociological dimension of civic education.

Chapter 3 will begin with a basic introduction into the historical evolution of Romania and the particular challenges that characterize its situation today. The second section of the chapter will then focus in on Romania's situation in the areas of civil society development and democratization more specifically. Together, those two sections are meant to familiarize the reader without any particular knowledge of the country well enough with its general background to understand the more specific issues related to the educational sector, which the remainder of the chapter will discuss, in their proper context. Since when speaking about education for democracy both the education of societal elites and more general mass education are of course of interest, section 3.3 will provide an overview of general civic education in Romania, whereas section 3.4 will focus on higher education in the social sciences. The final chapter will first provide a brief summary and analysis of the major shortcomings of and remaining challenges for civic education for democracy in Romania and

⁸ Gabriel Abraham Almond and Sidney Verba, *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations* (Boston: Little Brown & Company, 1965) and *The Civic Culture Revisited* (New York: Sage Publications, 1989).

⁹ Robert D. Putnam, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994).

relate them back to the context of the country's political evolution. It will then conclude with recommendations addressed to domestic as well as foreign and governmental as well as civil society actors. Some of these recommendations amount to proposals for formal educational reorganization. Others ask for a reorientation of support and commitment to take into account what has and what has not worked in reform efforts of the past.

John Dewey died in 1952, Nicolae Ceaușescu in 1989, but today their ghosts and spiritual descendants are battling in the classrooms and assembly halls of Romania. Can education contribute to informing citizens about their situations and their options and teach them to use their faculties in ways that will enable them to maximize their individual and social autonomy in free and democratic societies? Or does education serve to ensure docility towards ruling elites by means of selective information, deception, indoctrination and the organized numbing of the spirits of critique, sociability, and idealism so vital for democracy to function? While it is clear that the battle is not lost (the challengers have fighting spirit), it is also far from won. To fulfill Romania's quest to join up with the European Union and the larger community of democratic nations and to connect belatedly with the heritage of associational political cultures and enlightenment optimism, which together have been such a powerful force for democratic emancipation, continued improvement in education for civil society is absolutely crucial.