

The terror attack on 07/22 in Norway and the responses to it

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For Norway, the events on July 22 came as a shock – a young Norwegian, Anders Behring Breivik, attacked the government district in Oslo with a car-bomb and then went on to the island Utøya where he shot more than 60 youngsters belonging to the social democratic youth organization that had assembled there for a summer camp. Very soon his motivation became evident – none the least through his so-called “manifesto” in which he expresses attitudes that see Norway and Europe threatened by an Islamist conspiracy, supported by autochthonous accomplices. He felt like doing a historically necessary deed in order to save his country – and Europe – from an existential threat.

Saying this, it is clear that the terror attack has a European dimension and therefore we want to share some thoughts about the responses to it in the Norwegian society and about the consequences for future work in Citizenship Education.

What were the responses to terror in Norway?

- The immediate reaction by Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg on July 22 was: “We will meet terror with more democracy and openness”. This set the tone for the way in which the country has reacted since;
- The attacks were an expression of hatred against pluralism and diversity. Through the responses, the open and inclusive democratic culture was strengthened: throughout the national process of mourning one could experience that an inclusive national “We” was constituted, across ethnic and religious differences;
- More than before the voices of migrants’ voices, as those being attacked, as helpers and as supporters of Norway’s democratic national values have been heard in public and in the media;
- Anti-Islamic rhetoric, which had become widely accepted, even taking a form that at times resembled the formulations in Behring Breiviks manifesto, is met with more skepticism now.

A more “sober” debate about the challenges related to immigration and integration has been claimed – and so far been taking place.

Why can this send important signals to Europe?

- Right-wing populist tendencies gain territory in the public debate and in national politics nearly all over Europe;
- The suspicion that all Muslim citizens are more loyal to something else, namely their religion, than to the fundamental norms and laws of Western European societies has become a common place for media representations and public debates. This creates fear among many citizens and puts Muslims in the position of the nation’s “Others”.
- In the report of the CoE group of Eminent People, headed by Germany’s former foreign minister Joschka Fischer *“Living together - Combining diversity and freedom in the 21st-century Europe”*, xenophobia and intolerance are portrayed as the major threats for peace and sustainable democracy in Europe. At the same time, the report outlines the resources, which can be mobilized in order to overcome these threats, education being a central element of them. The recent terror attacks in Norway have proven the urgency of this work.

The attacks in Norway are a reminder that democracy in itself is under threat if the fact that European societies are becoming more and more diverse is experienced as a threat by growing parts of the population. Even if Behring Breivik is an extremist individual, his views are rooted in attitudes which have become broadly accepted and even mainstream in many European countries. This shows how urgently we need shared principles and values of living together in diversity, we need to develop an understanding and practice of intercultural citizenship in Europe.

In Norway, a range of educational initiatives are prepared and launched these days, dealing with the strengthening of democratic culture as culture pluralism and diversity. One of them uses the money raised by selling bracelets with the famous saying after the Utøya attacks, *“If one man can cause so much pain – imagine the amount of love we can create together”*, to build up an antiracist educational programme for Norwegian schools. This shows that the message of love as the answer to the terror is not as naïve as it might seem at the first glance.

Hopefully, the signs pointing in this direction in Norway will now last and inspire Europe.