

## ARISTOTLE ON THE ROLE OF MUSIC IN A *POLIS* \*

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**Abstract.** *In Chapters 7 and 8 of “Politics”, Aristotle presents his most detailed version of the philosophy of upbringing and education (paideia). According to his understanding, paideia is firmly connected to politics and political practice. Each political order determines its own way of upbringing and education, which has to achieve the goals to which the respective order aspires to the best possible extent. Thus, in a democracy, democratic education should be developed, in oligarchy and in the oligarchic kingdom it should be the education that best serves the goals of the monarchy. In this context, Aristotle in Chapter 8 of “Politics” discusses in great detail what music education in the polis should be in order to best serve the goals that its citizens set for themselves. Unlike Plato, while avoiding any kind of interventionism, Aristotle does not intend to prescribe what music and dance should be in one polis. He simply analyzes all possibilities, and according to his general methodological inclination in “Politics”, leaves it to citizens and legislators in every political order to make a final decision on it.*

**Key words:** *education, politics, music, dance, polis, citizens*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In the ancient period, we find two basic approaches and philosophical reflections regarding the purpose of art in the human community. According to one, whose most famous representative is Plato, politicians in the *polis* should keep art and mimetic artistic creation under control, since artists have a bad effect on the education of youth and citizens.<sup>1</sup> Plato did not even shy away from some kind of censorship in order to protect the youth and the citizens from the negative influence of the works of art. It is well

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<sup>1</sup> See in more detail: Platon, (1983), *Država*, BIGZ, Beograd, (377a-403c), pp. 57–86.

known from the later development of Western civilization and culture, and this also applies to Eastern ones, that many rulers, art theorists, as well as citizens were not unfamiliar with such attitudes. Human history is full of examples in which this or that art, this or that artistic creator are exposed to prohibition, and their works are censored. Likewise, in the modern world, we often encounter intolerance to certain artists and their works of art in our usual everyday discussions about art and works of art, especially those that strongly provoke our established moral or aesthetic attitudes.

However, the ancient tradition in considering the role of art in the human community also has another approach. The context in which Aristotle considers the importance of music for the life of citizens in the *polis* is the analysis and determination of the *paideia*. Since its content is very complex, this ancient Greek term is difficult to translate into any world language of today with only one linguistic equivalent. The meaning of this term in its original ancient use encompasses what we mean today by upbringing, education, culture, and teaching. In Chapters 7 and 8, Aristotle makes his most comprehensive interpretation of the significance of the *paideia* for the human “political community” (κοινωνία πολιτική). Similar to Plato, with Aristotle, we immediately understand unequivocally all the fateful connections of art with politics. Unlike some later epochs, in which purely aesthetic, romantic, or religious aspects of music and art, in general, were brought to the fore, in the classical age of antiquity, which is best witnessed by Plato and Aristotle, there was no doubt that art was in the most direct way connected to the political nature of man. All the differences that exist between Plato and Aristotle in understanding the role of art for the human political community, in fact, derive directly from the fundamental differences that previously determined their understanding of politics.

## 2. POLITICS AND PAIDEIA

While Plato derives his understanding of politics from metaphysics, that is, from the theory of ideas and teachings about the soul, following which he then shapes the central core of his political theory expressed in the doctrine of the ideal state, Aristotle places the whole matter of politics in a more diverse context, in which he completely relativizes and makes meaningless the idea of an ideal pattern of political order.<sup>2</sup> Plato’s firm and eternal ideal of the best possible political order is dissolved in Aristotle into four types of criteria for perceiving the political order: the absolute best rule, the relatively best form of government, the best form of government given the current political relations, and the best form of government on average.<sup>3</sup>

While the central place in Plato’s understanding of politics is occupied by philosophers-politicians who should shape each *polis* according to the ideal pattern of political order (πολιτεία), according to Aristotle, only citizens are the ones who should choose the most adequate form of political order and implement it realistically. According to Aristotle’s classification of knowledge, within which politics is practical, he is not able to say anything more explicit than this. Since politics is not theoretical knowledge consisting of principles and their application to individual cases, we are not able to simply apply examples of good political practice from certain *polis* to some new political circumstances in another *polis*. It is

<sup>2</sup> On Plato’s understanding of politics see in more detail: Barbarić, D., (1995), *Grčka filozofija*, Školska knjiga, Zagreb, pp. 103–105.

<sup>3</sup> See in more detail: Pol. 1288b 22ff.

this fact that makes policy-making so complex. For example, the Boethians cannot “copy” to their *polis* a good political order or political practice from Athens, but must themselves look for those solutions that suit them best. Therefore, dealing with politics according to Aristotle is always contained in discussing various possibilities, in examining the good and the bad sides of this or that solution. Precisely, the whole philosophy of politics in Aristotle, just the opposite of the way Plato imagines it, is actually a dispute, that is, a debate in which, according to the specific political circumstances in the *polis*, the best possible political solutions are sought.

Politics understood as a dispute is clearly visible in the key phrase of the entire *Politics* – “man is by nature a political animal (πολιτικὸν ζῷον)”.<sup>4</sup> Namely, since he belongs to the species of animals (ζῷον), but also has speech (logos) and the possibility of free decision-making (προαιρέσεως), which determines the way of decision-making in the *polis* and thus its political character, a man actually has two sides, which are in constant “dispute”. One, which is determined by instincts and nature, and the other, which is based on logos and free decision-making. Therefore, here we see once again why the constant discussion (ἀμφισβητεῖν) about what is good and useful for the citizens of the *polis*, and what is not, is actually the essence of a human political being. In that sense, the context in which we need to analyze Aristotle’s understanding of music and art is his definition of man as a political animal. Thus, the political practice of decision-making based on debate, as the inner essence of human political nature, represents the immediate context for understanding the role of music in the *polis*.

At the very beginning of Chapter 8 of *Politics*, Aristotle clearly states his position on the *paideia*: “No one can deny (ἀμφισβητήσεται) that caring for the *paideia* of the youth is primarily the duty of the legislator”.<sup>5</sup> Without any hesitation, Aristotle clearly indicates that the basic framework for upbringing and education in the *polis* is provided by legislators, i.e., politicians, who define the context in which the *paideia* will take place through legal frameworks and special processes. In the times we live in today, this thought is easy to understand. Laws regulating the field of upbringing and education (General Law on Education, Law on Primary and Secondary Education, Law on Higher Education, etc.) define all the important parameters in which educational processes take place. After that, all bearers of educational competencies, i.e., educators, teachers, and professors, act according to their duties within the existing legal framework. Like it or not, we cannot act against or outside the legal framework that significantly characterizes an educational system, precisely because in the entire European tradition, education is a legally regulated area.

To go further on, Aristotle connects *paideia* even more tightly with politics. Apart from the legislators, another important political fact significantly determines the *paideia*: “... Because every political order (πολιτεία) requires a special *paideia*”. Aristotle simply describes here what he finds in the existing political practice and notes that every political order, through laws and customs which rule in upbringing and education, forms by itself the kind of educational practice that affirms and maintains the existing order. Therefore, in a democracy, the *paideia* will be democratic, in the oligarchy oligarchic, and in the monarchy monarchist. In other words, upbringing and education in one *polis* should affirm the very form of the political order and help it to maintain and be successful.

<sup>4</sup> Pol. 1253a 3. *Politics* is cited according to a bilingual, ancient Greek-English edition: Aristotle, (1932), *Politics*, Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, Cambridge. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations of the citations are by the author.

<sup>5</sup> Pol. 1337a 10.

Aristotle observes a similar thing in the existing practice in the *polis* when it comes to morality: “Morality, characteristic of each individual political order, usually establishes a specific order and protects it from ruin. Thus, democratic morality preserves democracy, oligarchic oligarchy, and better morality always creates a better political order”.<sup>6</sup> Everything stated above seems very understandable. Namely, it is inconceivable that, e.g., in the monarchy, democratic customs in upbringing and education are being developed, or that, e.g., in a democracy, the way of upbringing and education that is characteristic to tyranny, or in today’s terminology, dictatorship. Morality and *paideia* in one order serve to shape both the citizens and the political form of the organization itself according to one political idea, i.e., the type of political organization. Therefore, Aristotle summarizes the analysis of the relationship between the political order and the type of *paideia* that is practiced in it: “As every *polis* has one goal, it is clear that the *paideia* must be unique and the same for everyone, and that it should be the concern of the *polis* and not of the individual”.<sup>7</sup>

Although it seems that everything works well in this context, from these last few words we can actually see where the problem lies. Namely, Aristotle simply observes that upbringing and education in practice are always divergent, since parents and teachers take care of children in their own way, and give them the kind of upbringing and education they want. Thus, in practice, the *paideia* is not implemented as one and unique form of a particular political order, but as many different ones. However, as we stated from the beginning, if we agree that one *polis* can be successful only if it has a single goal in terms of upbringing and education, which is in accordance with the specific political order and its key characteristics, then for that order itself it cannot be good if there are different practices of upbringing and education in it. However, as the practice in each *polis* is different, and the same is true today in every modern state, we can conclude that there is always a certain tension in the relationship between the political order and the practice of upbringing and education.

Thus, considering Aristotle’s understanding of *paideia*, we come to similar conclusions as well as in an attempt to understand his understanding of the essence of human political nature. The tension and controversy that characterize the way in which Aristotle understands political practice are at the same time features of *paideia*. Even though legislators pass laws that regulate educational practice in one way, individuals are inclined to interpret the *paideia* in their own way, and following that, parents educate their children, and teachers teach their students. That is how the *paideia* really takes place. Aristotle clearly outlines this tension in the *paideia* in the following way: “It is clear that there must be laws about the *paideia* and that it should be common to all (καὶ ταύτην κοινήν). Nevertheless, we must not lose sight of what the essence and method of *paideia* consist of. People argue (ἀμφισβητεῖται) about what school subjects should exist. People also disagree on what young people need to learn to achieve virtue or the best way of life. It is also unclear whether intellect or character should be influenced more”.<sup>8</sup>

As we can see from this short but important quote, many dilemmas exist in understanding the *paideia*, despite possible legal solutions that harmonize it with the basic character of the political order. Different parents raise their children differently, different teachers teach their students differently, there is no agreement on what subjects children should study at the

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<sup>6</sup> Pol. 1337a 15.

<sup>7</sup> Pol. 1337a 21.

<sup>8</sup> Pol. 1337a 34.

appropriate levels of their schooling, and there is no agreement on what exactly young people should learn to fulfill the main goals of the *paideia*. The most important thing, as Aristotle also clearly points out, is that there is no agreement on what should be the main goals of the *paideia* – is it the achievement of virtue, or rather the best way of life?<sup>9</sup> At the same time, it is also not entirely clear whether the development of the intellect of the ones who are educated should be influenced by their character. Today, some other dilemmas would be more topical in a debate about upbringing and education, such as whether mastering competencies and skills is more important in the educational process, or whether more attention should be paid to shaping a complete and free personality ready for a critical attitude towards social reality.

To make a long story short, we can conclude that – just as for Aristotle politics is a controversial activity since its basic content is a permanent discussion of the most important issues of a community, we can also conclude the same for *paideia*. Namely, the essence of the *paideia* in a political community is that people argue about what it should be like. This means that it is not something already determined, defined, which should then be implemented as a ready-made and indisputable thing, but quite the opposite – an inseparable part of the *paideia* must be a constant discussion of what it is, therefore, nurturing a culture of arguing about the most important issues connected to *paideia*. So, we could most accurately say that the essence of the *paideia* lies in the dispute over what it really is and how it should be implemented.

### 3. MUSIC IN THE *POLIS*

Aristotle determines the place of music in the *polis* following the understanding of the essence of the *paideia*, that is, in accordance with the understanding of man as a political animal.<sup>10</sup> In his analysis of music, he sees that it has a threefold function for citizens in the *polis*: the first is related to dance and entertainment, the second is educational, closely related to character shaping, and the third is related to leisure entertainment.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, he pays equal attention to each of these functions. He first says: “Today, most people do it for pleasure”.<sup>12</sup> Aristotle is aware that music combined with dance is a source of enjoyment for many people. Since music and dance, in general, played an extremely important role in the daily and ritual life of ancient peoples, the enjoyment that accompanied them has always been an integral part of their attitude towards the phenomena and problems that determine them. In this, we clearly see their cathartic role. Music and dance, accompanied by enjoyment, have actually served people since ancient times as a kind of vent from the hard daily struggle to sustain life. These are the moments when people understand music and “put it together with drinking ... and dancing”. This relaxation from everyday stresses, persistent efforts to obtain food, struggles to maintain security, etc., enabled people to cope more easily with all the problems that marked their daily lives. Having in mind this understandable human need,

<sup>9</sup> See in more detail: Pol. 1337a 40.

<sup>10</sup> For a general critical review of the relationship between *paideia*, music, and politics, see: Destrée, P., (2013), “Education, Leisure, and Politics”, in: *The Cambridge Companion to Aristotle's Politics*, Marguerite Deslauriers and Pierre Destrée (eds.), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp. 301–23.

<sup>11</sup> See in more detail: Pol. 1338b 13-1342b35. For a more detailed critical review of these three functions, see: Depew, D.J., (1991), “Politics, Music and Contemplation”, in: *A Companion to Aristotle Politics*, edited by David Keyt and Fred D. Miller, Jr. Blackwell, Oxford, pp. 367–374.

<sup>12</sup> Pol. 1337b 30.

Aristotle is in no hurry to condemn this sensual use of music and dance, but on the contrary, he shows open understanding for it. This use of music as a companion to the human need for enjoyment is simply part of the commonplace, and as such benefits the community because it allows people to relax from a hard and not at all comfortable life, as most people lived not only in ancient times but especially in other prehistoric times.

Aristotle defines the second function of music as educational, that which concerns the shaping of character and human personality. The following two quotations explain in more detail what exactly Aristotle means here: “It is clear, therefore, that music provides a certain *paideia* that should be given to young people not because it is useful or necessary, but because it is beautiful and worthy of a free man”.<sup>13</sup> A little further, he adds: “Music should be understood as a means of developing virtue which, like gymnastics, develops certain traits of the body, can educate certain traits of character, accustoming people to true and pure joy ...”. This function of music is as clear as the previous one. Since music has always been a part of our lives, people have been constantly arguing with each other about what kind of music is best for developing desirable character and personality traits. Aristotle does not present the second function of music here as something indisputable and clearly defined, but only describes the controversies that accompany it. First of all, there is no complete agreement among the members of the community about what are the desirable character traits that need to be developed. Also, attitudes about it differ among members of different communities. What character traits are desirable for members of one community, they are not for members of another community. At the same time, there is no less disagreement about exactly what music, what rhythms and harmonies, members of a community should listen to in order for music to fulfill its educational function. Moreover, Aristotle also raises the dilemma of how exactly music should look like as a special educational subject, and additionally – whether children who go to school should learn to perform music themselves or just listen to it. If we accept that children should learn to perform music on their own, then the dilemma consists in this: “what songs and rhythms should they learn and what instruments should they learn to play, because that is where differences also should be made”.<sup>14</sup> So, many dilemmas arise when considering the educational function of music, and it is also very difficult to reach an agreement on them.

The third function of music concerns its connection with the time a person spends at leisure. Aristotle simply signifies its application: “The ancients introduced it to have a good time”, and adds “... its purpose is entertainment during leisure, and that seems to be its application”.<sup>15</sup> Namely, if we understand leisure as something very important for human development, since it is a period of the day that a person does not dedicate to hard work and maintaining daily life, Aristotle points out that we will spend that time best if we “learn something that will fill free time”. For that reason, Aristotle points out that in ancient times, music was introduced as a school subject in order to bring people what other activities could not. Gymnastics is, e.g., useful for health and physical strength, the skill of drawing is useful to make it easier to evaluate works of art, and musical skill is important because it brings a person fun in leisure time. In order to make a clear distinction in relation to the first function of music, it should be noted here that Aristotle actually means elegant feasts “worthy of a free man”, in which conversations between

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<sup>13</sup> Pol. 1338a 22.

<sup>14</sup> Pol. 1341a 2.

<sup>15</sup> Pol. 1338a 22.

guests are accompanied by pleasant music performed by musicians. The key difference between the first function related to enjoyment and the one aimed at entertainment is that the latter is not accompanied by dance. The music performed by musicians at elegant parties serves more as a kind of “*décor*” that should bring a more sublime tone to the conversations that the interlocutors lead or the poetry they recite and make the atmosphere even more pleasant for all of them. Quite simply, this is a type of custom that is a little harder for us to understand today since our time does not know this type of use of live music. Namely, today we are very inclined to treat music as a kind of aesthetic decor for our everyday life, by letting it “play in the background” while we are talking to our guests, or relaxing in the living room reading the newspaper, watching TV, or studying in our study room, but the above-mentioned use of live musicians in the modern world can only be part of some rare, almost bizarre situations in the lives of extremely rich people. However, at the time Aristotle is talking about, this was apparently a common practice at all feasts prepared not only by members of the nobility in the time of archaic Greece but also by members of the city elite in the classical era.<sup>16</sup>

In the whole context of Aristotle’s interpretation of the role of music in the *polis*, there is also an interesting discussion at the very end of Chapter 8 of *Politics*. Aristotle speaks here about whether the program of music as an educational subject should include learning all harmonies and rhythms, or whether some choice should be made, bearing in mind that certain melodies and rhythms affect the audience in a specific way.<sup>17</sup> Referring to the standpoints of some other philosophers, which unfortunately we cannot identify from his writings, he presents the division of melodies into those that educate, those that encourage work, and those that arouse passions. Each of these melodies is accompanied by the appropriate kind of harmony. Aristotle further analyzes the different effects of each of these types of melodies. Although at times it seems that in some situations he prefers one type of melody to another, Aristotle, following his general approach in *Politics*, avoids marking certain types of melodies as the best or ideal, and at the same time, he also avoids completely rejecting other types. As elsewhere in this writing, in the analysis of the *paideia*, he is not inclined to idealize certain things and absolutely reject or even forbid others.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Aristotle’s entire discussion of the role of music in the *polis* takes place in the context of the question of what kind of music education children should receive at school, that is, what kind of music they should listen to. In addition to considering the teaching aspects of music education, Aristotle of course analyzes here the broader effects that music has on the citizens of the *polis*. What is the specificity of his approach to this problem? What is the essence of the way Aristotle sees the role of music in the *polis*?

Aristotle pays equal attention to all the functions that music has. Although he sometimes seems to be personally inclined to put the educational character of music in the forefront, he still doesn’t really do that as a whole. Every aspect of music and every function of it, Aristotle sees not only from a musical or artistic point of view but above all, considering the overall function it has for the *polis* and its members. Therefore, he

<sup>16</sup> See in more detail about these customs: Flacelière, R., (1959), *La vie quotidienne en Grèce*, Librairie Hachette, Paris, pp. 187–193.

<sup>17</sup> See in more detail: Pol. 1341b 19.

summarizes his consideration of music as follows: “Music is rightly classified in all three areas and seems to belong to each of these”.<sup>18</sup> Thus, Aristotle is not inclined to, e.g., music that is listened to in a state of leisure at feasts, mark as the music of less importance than educational music that has the task of forming a character. Also, he is not able to claim that for the music that accompanies dance and play and serves to enjoyment and relaxation from the hard everyday life. Just as he claims in the previous quote, all those types of music, that is, all those musical functions, have the right to be called music. The reason for the lack of tendency to grade different uses of music in any way lies precisely in Aristotle’s previous definition of the *paideia* in the *polis*. Since music is part of the *paideia*, and at the same time the essence of the *paideia* is determined by the fact that it has an essentially political character in the *polis*, i.e., that its essence always remains open to discussion and cannot be strictly declared, the role of music in the *polis* cannot be determined in some prescriptive and doctrinal way. There is no way to prescribe to the citizens of the *polis* which music they should listen to, i.e., which of the functions of music should only be practiced and which should be neglected.

The following sentence of Aristotle is the best evidence of that: “We believe that dealing with music brings not one but many benefits. In the first place, it is a *paideia* and a catharsis of feelings, and in the third place, music is used for fun, relaxation and rest from exertion”.<sup>19</sup> Considering music, neither from professional artistic frameworks, nor from narrow class prejudices, Aristotle in Chapters 7 and 8 of *Politics* manages to capture the role of music in the *polis* in a complex and comprehensive way, having in mind the practical benefits it brings to members of political communities. Thus, Aristotle’s view is not subject to only one aspect that a certain type of music carries within itself, or only to one function that it carries with it, but sees it in a holistic way, primarily having in mind the real benefits that the members of *polis* could have. If the phenomenon of music, i.e., the problem of the program of teaching music as an educational subject, is viewed in such a way, then indeed all three of the above functions of music must be taken as equally important. According to the first, yet not the most important place, like gymnastics that shapes the body of students, music shapes their character, or in modern language, their personality. Appropriate rhythms and melodies shape one type of personality, and some others form a different type of our character. It is a function of music that has long been noticed in the whole of European civilization, and according to this insight, different types of music are chosen for different occasions, i.e., different educational purposes.

However, no less important is the function of music that is related to play and dance, that is, the enjoyment that accompanies those actions. In the above quote, Aristotle finally explains to the end what it is all about. A function that he describes as cathartic, i.e., the one that aims to purify and release certain feelings, is equally important for the daily life of *polis* members. Since dance was associated with many rituals, but also with many other everyday situations in which it meant celebrating something or simply satisfying the need for sensual enjoyment, this type of use of music was an extremely important component in people’s lives, not only in the political community such as the *polis* was but also in all previous forms of association in prehistoric times.

Finally, the third type of function of music, since it concerns the time we spend in leisure hours, has the purpose of bringing people fun and relaxation from the busy everyday

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<sup>18</sup> Pol. 1339b 17.

<sup>19</sup> Pol. 1341b 35.



life. Although this understanding of music might be criticized for looking at music as a lower and secondary thing, which should only “beautify” the atmosphere in which we spend leisure time, and that in that sense it is something less valuable, Aristotle is very clear and precisely assigns a significant place to it. Since the way of life of a person in the *polis* is most often related to hard daily work, the human need to relax and have fun at the end of the day is deeply understandable. This use of music frees members of the *polis* from tension and nervousness, which were certainly largely followed by the ordinary day of most people. Aristotle does not see this function of music as any less important than, for example, an educational function that deals with some, conditionally speaking, higher aspects of people’s lives.

From all the above, it is clear that Aristotle cared equally about preserving and nurturing all the three functions of music in the upbringing and education of members of the *polis*. Since he considers all aspects of people’s lives in the political community to be equally important, both sensory and material, but also moral and spiritual, he simply cannot allow any of the functions of music to prevail at the expense of the other two. For Aristotle, speaking in modern terminology, the cognitive aspects of personality are as important as the conative ones, or the social and emotional ones. Also, the sensory and material aspects of enjoyment are just as important as the spiritual and aesthetic ones. He, therefore, refuses to give any of the above functions of music any priority, precisely because he considers all three functions necessary for the development of a happy member of the *polis*.

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### ARISTOTEL O ULOZI MUZIKE U *POLISU*

U 7. i 8. glavi “Politike”, Aristotel iznosi svoju najdetaljniju verziju filozofije vaspitanja i obrazovanja (*paideia*). Prema njegovom shvatanju *paideja* se čvrsto vezuje za politiku i političku praksu. Svaki politički poredak utvrđuje svoj način vaspitanja i obrazovanja, koji ima da u najboljoj mogućoj meri ostvaruje ciljeve kojima dotični poredak teži. Tako u demokratiji treba razviti demokratsko vaspitanje, u oligarhiji oligarhijsko, a u kraljevini ono vaspitanje koje najbolje služi ciljevima monarhije. U tom kontekstu Aristotel u 8. glavi “Politike” vrlo detaljno razmatra kakvo treba da bude muzičko obrazovanje u *polisu* da bi najbolje služilo ciljevima koje njegovi građani postavljaju pred sebe. Za razliku od Platona, izbegavajući pritom bilo kakvu vrstu intervencionizma, Aristotel nema nameru da propisuje kakvi treba da budu muzika i ples u jednom *polisu*, već naprosto analizira sve mogućnosti, i prema svojoj opštoj metodološkoj sklonosti u “Politici”, ostavlja građanima i zakonodavcima u svakom političkom poretku da donesu konačnu odluku o tome.

Ključne reči: vaspitanje, politika, muzika, ples, polis, građani