



**POPULISM, DEMOCRACY, AND  
THE ROLE OF CIVIC EDUCATION:**

BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN  
ACADEMIA AND POLICY PRACTICE

Marina Cino Pagliarello, Malina  
Aniol, Pedro León Sanjurjo Hanck,  
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## A NOTE ON THE CIVIC EDUCATION RESEARCH PROGRAMME

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*To understand the flourishing or, more often in recent years, the decay of democracies in Europe in a more holistic way, the research programme sets out to explore one possibly key driver of democratic values, norms and practices, namely, civic education. Research on education usually hones on public expenditure or a more macro-level approach to educational structures. Hypotheses assign relationships to educational system structure and professional attainment in various sectors. What is less clear is the relationship between educational structure and questions of citizenship, voter behaviour, or attitudes towards democracy or the EU. In adopting the latter approach, the 89 Initiative aims to fill a considerable gap in the policy debate.*

*A first report “The missing link between civic education and populism: restoring civic faith amongst Europe’s youth” published in 2019 examines if and how populism could be challenged by civic education in Europe as it is often mentioned as a possible remedy to anti-establishment movements but rarely analysed in-depth. The paper maps the various civic education curricula and methodologies within Europe, highlighting a considerable diversity within Europe’s school systems. It then proceeds with a detailed analysis and comparison of the connection of populism and civic education in England and Italy symptomized by the Brexit campaign and the “Movimento 5 Stelle” party.*

*In March 2021, the research programme launched the podcast series “**Re-Thinking education in turbulent times**” with the objective to discuss current topics in the practice and research of civic education and to make it available to a broader non-academic audience.*

*Episodes already available:*

- *First episode: “Revolutionizing European Civil Society with a European Agency for Citizenship Education”*
- *Second episode: “Media and political literacy in the UK – Towards a more informed future”*

**More information about our research programme, publications, and podcasts series can be found on:**  
<https://89initiative.com/civic-education/>

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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The current global pandemic poses enormous challenges for public health authorities, governments, experts, and the scientific community. Issues such as the uncontrolled spread of misinformation, growing socio-economic tensions following government' responses to the health crisis potentially exploited by populists parties and actors, and shortfalls of social policy institutions to address citizens' welfare are all factors which directly challenge the present and the future of democracies. These complex challenges directly question the role of civic education. Educational factors are often being cited as necessary to understand the appeal of populism, anti-establishment, or attitudes towards the EU; however, very little theoretical and empirical research has been done to understand how civic education can help individuals to gain greater trust towards democratic institutions, especially within the current Covid19 turmoil. Whereas education and civic education are often mentioned as key factors for the healthy functioning of democracies, theoretical research and empirical evidence are still scarce.

This study aims at encouraging a more systematic dialogue between academic research and policy practice on the themes of civic education, populism, and democracy. The report provides a detailed analysis of the most recent academic research linking civic education and populism and examines the most promising research avenues. It also discusses perceptions, developments, and main challenges in the current policy practice of civic education through 14 interviews with practitioners, experts, and representatives of civil society organizations actively involved in civic education initiatives at European and national level.

Overall, we identify specific recommendations about how a democratic future and a sense of belonging to a community can be promoted through civic education under two main dimensions. First, more efforts should be made by academic research to create an impact research agenda that can understand the mechanisms through which populism operates and which can demonstrate the benefits of civic education for democratic societies. Second, we call for a more comprehensive and systematic role of the European Union in acting as an "institutional

friend” and partner by supporting associations and networks across Europe to share best practices and work in synergy.

Although this report represents a preliminary effort to examine these issues and challenges, the analysis prompts a critical assessment of the need of bridging the gap between academia and policy practice to start a more systematic conversation on “what kind” of civic education we should promote for the healthy functioning of democracies.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

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Educational factors are often cited as necessary to understanding the appeal of populism, the anti-establishment, or attitudes towards the EU; however, very little theoretical and empirical research has been done to understand 'what kind' of education can help individuals gain greater trust in democratic institutions. Several studies and reports mention the 4Cs – communication, collaboration, critical thinking, and creative thinking as critical elements in equipping students with the right skills to face the challenges of the 21st century. While maintaining that these four are indeed, we also contend that a fifth C – that of citizens – should be added and further investigated. Understanding what kind of civic education<sup>1</sup> should be implemented in schools is of paramount importance when reflecting on young people's concerns and attitudes towards democracy and political institutions. Whereas education and civic education are often mentioned as key factors for the healthy functioning of democracies, theoretical research and empirical evidence are still scarce. At the same time, the Covid-19 pandemic portends troubling economic, social, and geopolitical crises, which could ultimately endanger democratic societies. Studies and reports warn that the Covid-19 crisis may produce a severe financial impact, leading to unemployment, supply chain disruptions, financial losses, increasing economic inequality, and growing social exclusion. In addition, Covid-19 might also represent a risk in relation to the erosion of democracies, with populists potentially taking advantage of the general public's social panic and insecurity.

Against this backdrop, we argue in this policy paper that more systemic efforts need to be made to understand how civic education and populism might be related. Scholars and analysts have tried to account for the rise of populism from multiple angles, from socio-economic to educational factors, but the literature on the specific role of civic education on the populist phenomenon is still in its infancy. After having reflected in our previous work on how civic education is taught in European countries and with which kind of limitations (Cino Pagliarello et al. 2019) - we adopt in this policy paper a dual approach. Specifically, we examine two different yet intertwined directions by looking separately at the current state of academic research and policy practice on civic education.

With this double goal in mind, the first part of the report reviews the most recent academic literature examining the relationship between civic education, democracy, and populism, and discusses which aspects of civic education have captured the attention of research into populism. In the second part, we provide original findings resulting from semi-structured interviews with 14 stakeholders and civic education experts on 1) the current context of and developments in civic education, 2) the impact of academic research on policy practices and 3) the type of challenges and priorities that should be included at the top of the European agenda on civic education. In addressing a wide range of scholarship on civic education, democracy, and populism, we make a case for paying greater attention to civic education as a key component of democratic politics.

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<sup>1</sup> Since civic and citizenship education aim to provide young people with the skills, knowledge and attitudes necessary for their greater participation in society (Schulz et al., 2016), both terms are considered synonymous and will be used interchangeably in the following report.

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## 2. METHODOLOGY

Populist and democratic challenges pose several questions for civic education research. This policy report aims to provide a general overview of the current academic research and policy practices on civic education through two – separate yet interlinked – rounds of research. On the one hand, we conducted an exploratory literature review to identify - from a political science (and Euro-centric) perspective - studies explicitly addressing civic education and populism. On the other, we interviewed a group of stakeholders and experts in civic education from different countries and backgrounds. Interviewees' selection was based on several criteria. We selected experts and stakeholders, both male and female, from different geographical backgrounds. Appendix 1 presents a list of the stakeholders and experts that were involved in the interviews. In so doing, our aim was not to focus on the particularities of each country or to make any comparison but to gain a broader view of the topic of civic education and its national and European developments from multiple perspectives. We also selected interviewees who possessed a solid professional record of education for civic education and were involved in European networks.

Interviews were conducted online between February and March 2021, and each of them lasted around 45-50 minutes. Audio recordings of the interviews were then transcribed for a thematic analysis of the responses aimed at understanding the current state of the art in civic education. In particular, the interviews attempted to illuminate:

1. the context of civic education at national and/or European level and main developments therein;
2. the relationship between academic research and policy practice;
3. the main challenges related to civic

education, democracy, populism and its related sub-dimensions (e.g. digitalisation, media literacy, etc.).

In the remainder of this policy report, we first present the key themes and avenues of research emerging from the literature review. Then, we move on to the results emerging from our conversation with experts and stakeholders. In the final part of the report, we focus on some key recommendations that encompass the various aspects of the complex interaction between civic education and populism in academia and policy practice.

### 3. POPULISM, DEMOCRACY, AND THE ACADEMIC RESEARCH ON CIVIC EDUCATION

Despite being one of the initial objects of study within the field of political science, civic education was scarcely researched for decades – mostly due to misunderstandings about the effectiveness about such types of curricula in schools – and only came back to the fore of the research agenda in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Galston, 2001; Campbell, 2019). Since then, research in English has been dominated by an almost exclusive focus on the US and Anglo-Saxon countries, such as Australia or the UK. Initially, the study of civic education was closely linked to that of political socialization, with the former created as a tool to attain the latter. As Niemi and Hepburn (1995) point out, however, the research that started in the 1950s was halted only a couple decades later due to misunderstandings about the research findings (as well as the scarcity of these). On top of this, Dudley and Gitelson (2010) argue that the study of the political socialization process and the acquisition of political knowledge has historically been normatively loaded. These authors called for a more rigorous approach to understanding how the acquisition of political knowledge plays out, in order to design appropriate standards of civic education that promote civic engagement.

#### Civic education and political participation

More recently, the bulk of the research carried out has focused on the relationship between civic education and political participation and civic engagement. As Torney-Purta (2010) highlights, in a IEA Civic Education Study with 90,000 adolescents from 28 countries it became apparent that, if schools want to foster civic engagement, they need to rigorously teach civic content and skills, ensure an open classroom climate for discussing issues, emphasize the importance of the electoral process, and encourage a participative school culture. In the latest literature review to date, Campbell (2019) argues that, although the existing data are limited,

there is growing evidence that both formal and informal civic education has meaningful and long-lasting effects on young people's civic engagement. More concretely, according to this author there are four elements of civic education in schools that have a direct impact on civic learning and engagement and which can compensate for a lack of civic resources in the students' families and communities: classroom instruction, extracurricular activities, service learning, and a school's ethos.

A key concept in the existing literature is that of political self-efficacy, which has long been deemed a fundamental political attitude for political participation (Almond & Verba, 1963) and is understood as 'the feeling that one is capable of influencing the decision-making process' (Goel, 1980, p. 127). Efficacy is in turn sub-divided into two categories: internal efficacy, which relates to the beliefs of one's ability to understand and take part in political life, and external efficacy, related to the belief about the political system's responsiveness to one's political actions. Of these two categories, promoting internal efficacy has traditionally been one of the main goals of civic education, with a view to enhancing citizens' participation and engagement (Kahne & Westheimer, 2006). Within this field of research, Pasek et al. (2008) examined the long-term effects of a civic education program in public high schools in Philadelphia and found that 'a supplementary civics education program (...) can increase subsequent participation in politics by building long-term gains in political self-efficacy and skills in using the news media to follow government and political affairs' (p. 26).

#### Civic education and populism

While Western democracies have witnessed a considerable upsurge of populism in recent years, analysts and scholars point out that its educational implications have been scarcely researched (Petrie,

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McGregor, & Crowther, 2019). Some scholars have argued that 'populism as an issue of contemporary relevance for democratic education lacks a comprehensive theoretical account' (Mårdh & Tryggvason, 2017).

It seems indeed that the high volume of research devoted to understanding the effects of civic education on political participation and civic engagement, with its strong focus on the concept of political self-efficacy, has little use to understanding the relationship between civic education and populism. As a matter of fact, looking at the demand side of politics, the most recent and promising research departs significantly from the existing literature by pointing out that populism is very much related to emotions and misinformation rather than to political knowledge or efficacy. For example, Spruyt, Keppens and Van Droogenbroeck (2016) analyse survey data from Flanders and find that support for populism can be empirically distinguished from feelings of lack of external political efficacy and that populism is embedded in deep feelings of discontent and dissatisfaction with the social status quo.

In the same vein, Van Kessel, Sajuria and Van Hauwaert (2020) analyse survey data from nine European democracies (France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland, Spain, Switzerland, Sweden, and United Kingdom) and find that support for populist parties is not related to political efficacy. Instead, 'politically informed individuals, i.e. those who have political resources, are more likely to actively support any political party', whether populist or not (p.1). Supporters of populist parties are therefore not politically unsophisticated or naïve. For these authors, the explanatory variable is not political information, but misinformation – that is, having factually incorrect information. This is especially the case for right-wing populism. As they put it, 'being incorrectly informed, but believing or claiming to be correctly informed, characterises right-wing populist

party supporters, or at least makes it more likely that a person will support a right-wing populist party' (p. 16). They conclude that 'far from always being a sign of ignorance or an expression of hollow protest, the support for a populist party may well signify a purposeful choice by politically informed, interested, and efficacious citizens' (p, 18). For their part, Estellés and Castellví (2019) also echo the idea that populist voters are neither ignorant nor unable to understand the complexity of current politics, at least no more than their opponents. The key element for them is that authoritarian populism builds extensively on the widespread use of digital hate speech and the increasing presence of emotions in the political debate.

### Implications for civic education

This emergent strand of literature has clear implications for how to tackle populism from the classroom. A first point to be noted here is that, although a few authors clearly advocate for civic education as 'the best way to counter the populist trend' by fostering liberal attitudes (Norrlof, 2019), the recurring position among most scholars is that civic education is not considered to be the silver bullet to do away with populism, but that it can contribute to palliate it. In effect, Estellés and Castellví, in a pioneering, scene-setting article where they interview a group of 6 experts on democratic citizenship education from Canada, Chile, Spain, the UK, and the US, report that 'the majority of the educators interviewed pointed out that the rise of authoritarian populism is not mainly an educational problem and, therefore, that it cannot be concluded that schools have a major and direct responsibility in the spread of this phenomenon' (2019, p. 7). The new departing point is the salience of the informational (cognitive) and emotional (affective) dimensions in the conformation of political choices, from which a number of educational implications can be derived.

First, of relevance for the *cognitive dimension* of the populist phenomenon – that politically misinformed citizens are more likely to vote for (right-wing) populist parties – research on misinformation and (civic) education abounds specifically in relation to ‘fake news’, critical thinking and media literacy. However, while this literature is useful and has important educational implications, it needs to be noted that it is mainly focused on the concepts of (digital) civic engagement (Hobbs et al., 2013; Martens and Hobbs, 2015; Middaugh, 2019; Kahne and Bowyer, 2019) and not explicitly related to populism. These studies also tend to be centered on the United States.

In a context where adolescents and young adults mostly get their news through social media rather than more traditional sources, Kaufman (2020) reviews the literature on strategies at the disposal of civic educators when teaching how to evaluate information found online. For example, Kahne and Bowyer (2017) suggest that promoting discussions and other forms of active group work is more useful than giving lectures, as well as teaching how to accurately assess evidence-based arguments. On their side, Cook, Ecker and Lewandowsky (2015) argue that, for the new information to be accepted by students, classroom discussions should provide alternative explanations and address questions or misperceptions.

There are also studies that look at how to increase students’ ability to identify fake news through information literacy education, but do so looking at college level rather than at high school level (Auberry, 2018; Musgrove et al., 2018). Musgrove et al. (2018), for example, provide useful pointers for how to design media literacy curricula by underlining some of the psychological processes that intervene in the formation of perceptions on fakes news’ believability. These authors remind us that individuals tend to confer credibility to information based on familiarity (‘I’ve heard it before’), availability

(whether events can be easily remembered or not), as well as their own confirmation biases (interpreting information in a way that reinforces an individual’s beliefs and expectations). Teaching students how these psychological processes work is an important first step to allow them discern the veracity of a news piece.

There are some important works at last that explicitly look at media literacy and misinformation in relation to civic education and populism. In an ambitious and pioneering work carried out at European level, Ranieri et al. (2016) looked at how media literacy education, including media content analysis and civic self-expression through media, can help address the rise of authoritarian populisms that preferentially target young people. They find that, while broadly allowing students to identify stereotypes and deconstruct hate speech, the effectiveness of media literacy courses vary greatly according to the national context. Biesta and Lawy (2006) also identify this context-dependency as a potential obstacle to the effective implementation of civic education.

More recently, Rios Millett McCartney (2020) has put forward three methods to enable the youth to confront fake news and critically assess online information. First, educators must balance their own evidence in the classroom, which requires the use of credible sources as well as allowing the discussion of those sources’ biases. Second, educators should give students enough time to assess extremist positions and help them understand where those positions lead. Third, educators have to openly discuss what credible evidence consists of and the reasons for this. Finally, Rios Millett McCartney also supports the idea that, in order to teach democratic skills and habits, the lecture style of teaching needs to be overcome to allow room for discussion and the active participation of students.

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Second, when it comes to engaging with the *affective dimension* of the populist phenomenon – that populism builds on feelings of resentment and dissatisfaction – Estellés and Castellví (2019) make a first observation highlighting that, despite the fact that automatic impressions “are the main source of explicit beliefs and deliberate choices” and that “automatic intuitions are often responsible for our final moral and political judgments”, “many citizenship education programs and studies are still based on the Cartesian tradition of cogito, ergo sum and the notion of the ‘dispassionate citizen’” (p. 4) – although they fail to specify which curricula they refer to. Consequently, they argue that “citizenship education needs to consider that emotions are an intrinsic part of human thinking and that rational decisions cannot be made without emotions” (p. 5).

A broad number of authors have put forward their views on how civic education can be used to confront populism in its affective dimension. For Anderson (2017), while civic education might not be able to stop populism in itself, it can nonetheless contribute at the micropolitical level to foster ‘hopeful criticism’, namely, dispositions and practices that disclose potentialities for sustained action against the affective infrastructures of right-wing populism.

In turn, Zembylas (2020) stresses that “democratic education can provide the space for educators and students to think critically and productively about people’s affects, in order to identify the implications of different affective modes through which right-wing populism is articulated” (p. 1). For him, a ‘negative’ critique of the affective ideology of right-wing populism is not enough to counter it. Instead, “an affirmative critique is also needed to set alternative frames and agendas which endorse and disseminate alternative concepts and affective practices such as equality, love and solidarity” (p. 1). An ‘affirmative critique’, in focusing on the search for an alternative to a negative reality (the populist

view), would underline 'positive' and optimistic stories of 'alternative' belongings to reimagine other futures (Braidotti, 2013).

Zembylas (2021) further looks at the concept of 'microfascism' developed by Deleuze and Guattari and its importance to understanding the complexities of contemporary pedagogical efforts to combat populism, right-wing extremism, and fascism. This author suggests pedagogical strategies that could be used to counter microfascist subjectivities in the classroom, arguing that it is crucial to analyse the connections between micro- and macro-level fascisms. More concretely, Zembylas argues that pedagogical strategies are needed "that render the burdens of microfascism unbearable, namely, strategies that show to students how they are prevented from reimagining reality and opening new potentials in their lives, if they are trapped into fixed desires and anxieties about themselves and their relations to others" (p. 11). The author points out to 'reparative' pedagogies as being particularly valuable. These are pedagogies "that attempt to address microfascisms within a frame that takes into consideration histories of violence, trauma, oppression, and social injustice, without falling into the trap of sentimentality" (p. 12). In so doing, they "ask from educators and students to engage in alternative ways of relating to others" to attain "a deeper understanding of the affective complexities of microfascism, and particularly the complexity of complicity in racism, nationalism, extremism, sexism, and ableism" (p.12). While Zembylas' research represents a valuable starting point, more research arguably needs to be done into the mechanisms that civic education can resort to in addressing the affective dimension of populism.

Finally, beyond the cognitive and affective dimensions of populism, analysts have singled out certain elements that civic education curricula need to include to be most effective in countering populism. It has been argued that civic education

ought to focus on current events – the 'here' and 'now' – especially those that affect the lives of students (Estellés and Castellví, 2019; Westheimer, 2019 Kaufman, 2020). Besides being current affairs, these events should also revolve around controversial and explicitly political issues requiring thoughtful engagement, such as abortion rights (Estellés and Castellví, 2019; Westheimer, 2019). Furthermore, civic education courses should teach students how to ask challenging questions in order to allow them to dissent (Giroux, 2017; Westheimer, 2019). Lastly, civic education courses should present the issues of discussion from multiple perspectives with the goal of enabling students to engage in democratic dialog and jointly work toward agreed policies (Lin, Lawrence and Snow, 2015; Westheimer, 2019).

To sum up, from the literature examined it has become apparent that, if civic education is to be an important tool in countering the spread of populism in the EU and other Western democracies, it can no longer be exclusively geared to enable the political socialization and self-efficacy of students, which are means to promote political participation and civic engagement. Given the affective and cognitive mechanisms through which populism operates, civic education needs to enable students to temper the emotions that motivate support for populist solutions and identify misinformation efforts by populist parties and movements.

## 4. POPULISM, DEMOCRACY, AND POLICY PRACTICE ON CIVIC EDUCATION

### Civic Education in the policy practice: context and developments

Unsurprisingly, given that education is neither an exclusive or shared European competence, the context in which organizations operate needs to be embedded within their national specific context, meaning that their level of success is also dependent upon the institutional support they receive in their national settings. Providing an overview of the developments of the policy framework for citizenship education at European level goes beyond the scope of this report. However, it is important to mention the Council of Europe's role, which starting from its programme Education for Democratic Citizenship (1997), has significantly promoted democratic education and is very active in promoting democratic education. Moreover, an important development has been represented by the Paris Declaration adopted on the 17th of March 2015 by the European Ministers of Education on *"Promoting citizenship and the common values of freedom, tolerance and non-discrimination through education"*<sup>2</sup>. Although this Declaration constitutes more a declaration of intentions than laying out the specificities required for their actual implementation, it nevertheless has the merit of lending some moral support to civic education by highlighting its importance in triggering a sense of cohesion and solidarity at community level. In short, as also recognized by many interviewees the Council of Europe (and the European Union) act as an 'institutional friend' providing support and a framework of action which several of our organizations mention as important, especially in terms of endorsement and in terms of funding provision (e.g. through the Erasmus + programme).

In terms of context and developments of civic education in the countries examined in this study, a first element is represented by civic education considered as an important tool in a context of rising **populism**. For instance, as explained by the representative of the Centre for Citizenship Education in Poland, the national (and political) climate in the country with reference to civic education presents several challenges, and this has occurred since the change in the government in 2015. Currently, the teaching of civic education is reported to be more focused on conveying a patriotic image rather than strengthening civic skills, values, and attitudes. With the abolishment of middle schools and a change in the curriculum (with civic education mandatory only in the 8th grade but with no examination required), the importance of civic education, together with a decrease of governmental support, has rapidly deteriorated. Here, the European level is considered important not only for a sort of moral support in the face of populist governments but also as a funding resource. Similarly, the representative of the Austrian Society for Civic Education mentions that in Austria the increasing populist challenges experienced in the country have increased the demand for civic education; however, there is still lack of institutional and operational structures for its implementation. In Estonia, the representative of the Civic Education Centre mentions the sharp divide in society between Estonians and Russians who are often lacking citizenship rights and the importance of civic education to address this divide.

Several of the experts interviewed are actively involved within their organizations in initiatives aimed at increasing **democratic engagement** through the use of new technologies. For example, the European Association for Viewers Interests (EAVI) based in Brussels strives to represent citizens' interests in the European sphere through activities such as conferences, sharing of good practices, and the production of online resources

<sup>2</sup> Paris Declaration available at: <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/ebbab0bb-ef2f-11e5-8529-01aa75ed71a1>

mainly aimed at promoting media literacy and full citizenship, especially for young people. Always connected with themes linked to digital technologies in education, the Network Democratie is a non-profit platform for democratic innovation in Amsterdam which promotes a participative civil society by using technology to engage all citizens and whose activities also reflect the efforts taken at the national level to bolster active citizens participation through digitalisation. In the same vein, the Democracy and Human Rights Education in Europe network (DARE), which consists of 36 organizations working with education in democracy and human rights in 26 countries, explores digital transformation as a key prerequisite to promote democratic citizenship.

A key leitmotiv emerged during the interviews is the active role of many organizations in providing a platform for **exchange and study of policy practices through networking activities**. For instance, this is the case of the Federal Agency for Political Education in Germany, which is a federal public authority promoting awareness for democracy and political participation. The Agency also participates and leads the NECE initiative (Networking European Citizenship Education). Established in 2004, NECE aims at providing an added value to civic education in Europe through providing a platform for stakeholders and academics. The NECE initiative is supported and coordinated by several European citizenship education organizations. During their recent conference in November 2020, NECE issued the Declaration *"A watershed moment for citizenship education in Europe Citizenship education<sup>3</sup>"*, which provides a list of recommendations to the Council of Europe, the European Commission, European

parliament, national governments and cities and local communities, by stating that citizenship education should be at the top of the EU political priorities.

Several of the organizations interviewed in this report are actively part of **European networks**, when they are not network themselves; for example DARE, NECE, and the Association for Citizenship Teaching (ACT), this latter being part of the Five Nations Network, which is a unique forum sharing best practices in Civic education and values in England, Ireland, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. This suggests that, at the European level, there are already important non-governmental and operational structures in place. On the one hand, they advance the study and practice of civic education through networking and the sharing of information and best practices. On the other, they can act as catalyst factors for promoting more actions at supranational level.

Many of the organizations and associations also have a **direct role in leading school initiatives, supporting schools in teachers' training and educational material**, especially in the absence of concrete support at the school level. In Estonia, the Jaan Tonisson Institute, one of the country's oldest non-governmental organisations – founded in 1993 with the support of US donors – specifically provides teachers in-service training for civic education and offers textbook provision. Similar support is provided in the Czech Republic by the Association of Teachers of Civics and Social Sciences (Občankáři), which supports teachers in exchanging materials and publications on civic education. The Centre for Citizenship Education in Luxembourg, an independent foundation created in 2016 to promote active citizenship, offers educational material and activities as well as training on political and social topics in schools; as noted by the representative of the Centre, even though in 2017 a specific professional standard for Civic Education teacher

<sup>3</sup> NECE Declaration available at: [https://www.nece.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/NECE\\_declaration.pdf](https://www.nece.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/NECE_declaration.pdf)

has been introduced, there are only eight teachers specialised on civic education in the country with little support from schools which still prefers to teach civic education as a transversal subject rather than as a discrete subject. In Spain, where civic education faces several challenges due to ideological disputes on the role of civic education, decentralization issues, and lack of funding, the CIVES Foundation has established a Network of Citizenship Schools (Red de Escuelas de Ciudadanía) that acts as a resource center aimed at capturing experiences and best practices at the school level. Similarly, the Association for Citizenship Education (ACT) in the UK, established in 2001 by Bernard Crick, provides expert advice, training, and support in the delivery of citizenship education through the provision of modules, materials, activities, and policy engagement.

Various stakeholders mentioned the importance of several **enabling factors** for civic education. For instance, in the case of ACT, an important factor is its capacity to undertake policy influence at the national level and offer strong support, including some funding to teachers for taking part in conferences. Similarly, the Spanish CIVES Foundation strongly collaborates with public administrations and universities, thus articulating good political incidence. The majority of the stakeholders mentions that the ability to create and to maintain partnerships and networking are critical factors for promoting national (and European) dialogue on civic education policies and practices, they mention several challenges and potential constraints. Above all, there is the limited availability of funding which strongly limits the possibility of implementing further initiatives. As mentioned by many stakeholders, European funding – delivered mainly through the Erasmus+ funding – is the primary driver of civic education initiatives and activities. However, the key problem here is that this type of funding is often project-based rather than a stable structural finding that would ensure the long-term

stability of the interviewed organizations. In some cases, funding is provided by regional authorities, as in the case of Association of Teachers of Civics and Social Sciences in the Czech Republic.

### Academic research on civic education: what do stakeholders think?

Most of the stakeholders interviewed pointed out that more efforts need to be made in linking academic research and policy practice. With some notable exceptions, such as the International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS survey, which has been recognized as having an important comparative impact in informing policy-makers on students' level of participation in civic education<sup>4</sup>, what clearly emerges from the interviews is a lack of evidence-based research, which can inform policy-makers and stakeholders on what works in civic education policies and practices. Many of the interviewees emphasized that they are not aware of the most recent academic research in the field of civic education, and this is also a key challenge for teachers directly involved in the subject. As noted by the representative of the Civic Education Centre in Czech Republic, teachers often lack time to read the newest studies, so that NGOs have taken on this work, trying to bridge the gap between academia and teachers, given that “there is only a weak link between academic research and actual teaching to

4 ICCS 2016 was the fourth project conducted by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievements (IEA) in civic education. As the second cycle within the framework of the International Civic and Citizenship Education Study, ICCS 2016 monitored trends in civic knowledge and engagement over seven years in the countries that participated in ICCS 2009. The study assessed students enrolled in the eighth grade, provided that the average age of students at this year level is 13.5 years or above. In addition, ICCS drew samples of teachers in each school, with an option for teachers in subjects related to civic and citizenship education. In total, 94.000 students and 37.000 teachers from 3.800 schools located in 24 countries worldwide took part in the study. European countries included Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, the Netherlands, Norway, Russia, Slovenia and Sweden. A follow-up study will be published in 2022 which will put an emphasis on several topics including global citizenship education, digital competencies and bullying (online and offline).

the extent that new findings are not implemented". For the representative of the DARE network, cooperation between academia and policy-making is essential. One of the reasons is the opportunity for academics to provide a more theoretical basis on civic education practices. In this respect, academia should investigate complex questions such as the relationship between the teaching of democracy and support for social inclusion and to what extent the teaching of democratic values can contribute to de-radicalisation. A similar perspective is shared by the representative of the EAVI organisation who also points out to the paucity of research on topics such as media literacy, where the association is very active through the dissemination of multi-language material. For instance, they have created a cartoon called "A journey to media literacy" which is available in 21 different languages. However, some good practices also do exist. For example, the UK ACT is actively involved and engaged with academics. For example, a specific section of their website is entirely devoted to informing teachers on the newest research findings and publications. In Spain, many of the CIVES Foundation's trustees are engaged in university research on citizenship education, so CIVES' work is always in contact with the academic world.

In addition to a lack of academic research on practices and supporting institutional structures on civic education in Europe (for example, the Eurydice report, which is the most accurate study on the status of civic education but it is not a regular publication), another limitation noted by the representative of the Austrian Society for Civic Education is the lack of knowledge concerning non-formal and informal civic education together with the need of better theoretically and empirically unpack concepts such as citizenship education, civic education, and political education. In addition, and with reference to the two main existing comparative studies available in the European context - the ICCS/IEA and Eurydice - one interviewee

noted that these projects "are mostly done by academics for academics without a connection to the practitioners", whereas another one mentioned that "there are no connections between teaching and academia and they can be considered as two disconnected worlds".

All the stakeholders interviewed highlighted the importance to better grasp the quality of civic education and civic knowledge throughout Europe. For instance, as a complement to existing European studies, one stakeholder suggested that European tools such as the Eurobarometer could also cover questions on political literacy in its surveys. In the same vein, the representative for the Centre for Citizenship Education in Luxembourg mentioned the importance of complementing the ICCS/IEA with other studies more explicitly focusing on Europe and European participation opportunities in order to capture the perception of politics at different levels and age groups. Moreover, given that education is not a common European competence, it would also be important to provide more insights on specific national trends and challenges; as noted by the representative of CIVES Foundation, it is also important to zoom in more in details on how ultra-conservative and populists trends in some countries are impacting the teaching of civic education in schools.

### Challenges and the way forward

In the context of several socio-economic and health challenges, we asked our interviewees to provide their insights on what kind of themes and priorities they identify as the most urgent to be addressed.

A common concern is the exacerbation of societal-economic challenges. For instance, as noted by the representative of the Federal Agency for Civic Education in Germany, the current pandemic has intensified issues such as the spread of fake

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news, conspiracy theories, or anti-Semitism. The interviewee notes that it has become increasingly difficult to bring people to provide a safe and healthy space for discussions on civic education, with the pandemic triggering a return of narrower and nationalist thinking within society. The majority of our interviewees calls for consideration regarding how populism should be tackled by civic education, highlighting that it is crucial to understand: how democracy is changing (ACT); understanding how racism and xenophobia will have an impact on civic education (ICCS; CIVES); what role (mis)-information and digitalisation play in helping people influencing the political debate (EAVI) through for instance youth forums and conferences (Netwerk Democratie) also in relation with the current pandemic and potential economic crisis (ACT, Association of Teachers of Civics and Social Sciences). Stakeholders also refer to challenges existing in their national contexts, such as forms of right-wing populism, authoritarian tendencies (Austrian Society for Civic Education) and forms of (dis) integration of society (Centre for Citizenship Education; Jaan Tonisson Institute - Civic Education Centre).

Several interviewees also describe the importance of civic education for critical thinking in our so-called post truth era<sup>5</sup>, for example by addressing issues such as fake news, digitalisation, and disinformation. As noted by the representative of Values Unite, one of the major challenges Civic Education faces is the growing polarization and the shift to populist and extremist parties. Other themes mentioned are gender inclusion and climate change. Stakeholders are also preoccupied by the future of education and youth and how the European Union can provide policy support. As noted by the representative of the DARE network, the EU could play a pivotal role

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<sup>5</sup> According to the Oxford Dictionary, post-truth is defined as a melted digital reality "in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief".

as an innovation incubator and innovative practices. The EU should also create more awareness and allocate more funds to create an adequate space for inclusion and civic engagement, which should be two of the European Union's top priorities. In terms of tools for implementing these priorities, it is suggested to make use of the existing European platforms as well as implementing new networks for capacity-building. For example, the already mentioned NECE Declaration on civic education emphasizes the need for civic education to be more central in the priorities of the EU education agenda. Its Declaration identifies specific key challenges for young people, with funding needed to become for accessible for the different actors.

The majority of the interviewees point towards the need for a comprehensive EU strategy that aims at unifying approaches for guaranteeing civic education as a tool of transformational change, by increasing social and political participation of people in an increasing polarized society. As noted by one stakeholder, "more ambition is needed at the European level and an Agency could be the implementing arm".

The role of the Council of Europe is also considered extremely important.

In this respect, a recent and notable development has been the proposal advanced by Values Unite to establish a European Agency for Citizenship Education. As advocated in their recent discussion paper (December 2020).

*"A European Agency for Citizenship Education would seek to improve the access to and the quality of citizenship education in all EU member states and support the development of a European dimension of citizenship education.[...] The Agency would provide funding, learning materials, digital infrastructure and capacity- building opportunities to educators. It would work in a decentralised manner and in close cooperation with local and regional actors, but also*

*remain non-partisan and independent of governments and EU institutions' political agenda"*<sup>6</sup>.

Interestingly, and very promisingly, this proposal has also been widely quoted and supported by several of the interviewees, and it is also endorsed by 89Initiative and our Research programme. This support also demonstrates the important role of the EU as facilitator and as a promoter of knowledge exchange and information. As the representative of the Austrian Society for Civic Education stated "I do not know what is happening in France with regards to civic education. The EU needs to create a central point of contact that also publishes national research." In short, there seems to be a broad consensus that more European cooperation is necessary to overcome national limitations and ensure high-quality civic education in every country. Therefore, the establishment of a European Agency for Citizenship Education could play a crucial role in deepening the role of the European Union, by acting as a positive spill-over and as an investment in not only the present of Europe but in its future as well.

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<sup>6</sup> See also: [https://valuesunite.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Discussion\\_Paper\\_European\\_Agency\\_Citizenship\\_Education.pdf](https://valuesunite.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Discussion_Paper_European_Agency_Citizenship_Education.pdf)

## 5. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

This report has looked at the current state of the art of academic research on the themes of civic education, populism, and democracy. In addition, informed by 14 semi-structured interviews, it has explored the role of stakeholders and civil society organizations to understand which factors, topics, and challenges influence the way civic education is perceived and implemented. Although the study of civic education and populism is still at its infancy, and while maintaining the exploratory role of our findings, we conclude by proposing some recommendations on how academic research and policy practice could improve their actions through a more structured research-policy dialogue and what role the European level might play in facilitating it.

### Academic research

**1.** For civic education to effectively reverse the spread of populism, more research efforts should be devoted to understanding the affective mechanisms through which populism operates. The research should adopt an educational angle to help create learning materials that can be adapted and used widely in different national contexts.

**2.** Some national stakeholders have highlighted the difficulty to find out what is happening in other Member States in terms of populist (conservative) events related to the school context. To address this knowledge gap and raise awareness across organisations, issues pertaining to civic education should be analysed and made available at European level.

**3.** Stakeholders do not seem fully convinced by the value and availability of academic research. More efforts should be done by academia to create an impact research agenda to demonstrate the benefits of civic education for democratic societies. Research findings should

be communicated more clearly and presented to stakeholders.

**4.** The research carried out needs to be made available throughout the EU to ensure a common ground for activities in this field. To achieve this, translations should be made available and more countries need to be covered by researchers to ensure a better understanding in all countries and not merely in the largest ones.

### Policy practice

**5.** Civic education curricula should focus more on current and controversial issues and for this reason member associations should devote more time to address hot topics. National governments should give more voice to civic education teachers and include them in decisions related to national curricula.

**6.** The EU needs to adopt a preventive and not just a reactive perspective to address the rise of populism through civic education. It should be a structured and sustainable effort and not be based on separate and time-limited programs.

**7.** More emphasis should be given to innovative ways of civic engagement, such as storytelling and comics. Moreover, all ages should always be learning and there's a need to come up with a life-long learning process which includes formal, informal and non-formal learning methods.

**8.** The Council of Europe (outside the EU framework) could play a role in civic education at the international level as it is already recognized as an important "institutional friend" and partner. In addition, the creation of a pan-European agency on citizenship education as recommended by Values Unite would help associations and networks across Europe to share best practices and work in synergy

through a more systematic and sustainable use of EU funding.

**9.** With a view to helping teachers and educational centres prepare the right materials to work on the cognitive and affective dimensions of populism, the creation of an online repository of good, evidence-based educational practices at EU level could be an ambitious yet feasible and cost-effective tool. The European Commission's Directorate General for Education and Culture (DG EAC) or the e Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA) could be the host of such a platform. The set-up of this instrument could be inspired by the European Platform for Investing in Children (EPIC) and draw from existing experiences in the Member States. Furthermore, this resource would not only be useful for education professionals but also raise awareness across all Member States about the most effective practices.

**10.** The research carried out needs to be made available throughout the EU to ensure a common ground for activities in this field. To achieve this, translations must be made available and more countries need to be covered by researchers to ensure a better understanding in all countries and not merely in the largest ones.

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## APPENDIX

### List of organisations & networks

Name of the organisation	Geographical focus	Field of activity	Contact	Website
Association for Citizenship Teaching (ACT)	United Kingdom	ACT is an education charity and membership association established in 2001. It provides advice, expertise, network, training and support to citizenship education teachers in developing high quality curriculum and teaching in schools and colleges across the UK.	Liz Moorse - Chief Executive Officer	<a href="https://www.teachingcitizenship.org.uk/">https://www.teachingcitizenship.org.uk/</a> <a href="https://www.teachingcitizenship.org.uk/">teachingcitizenship.org.uk/</a> <a href="https://www.teachingcitizenship.org.uk/">teachingcitizenship.org.uk/</a>
Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung (Federal Agency for Civic Education)	Germany	The Federal Agency for Civic Education is the largest state funded organisation for civic education in Germany and currently has an office in Bonn and Berlin. It was set up with the aim to foster civic education in Germany and support the civil society as a nonpartisan organisation. As such, it offers a range of services targeted at all ages: from publications, to competitions, festivals, conferences or study trips. The Agency was also the initiator of the NECE network.	Petra Grüne - Head of Events	<a href="http://www.bpb.de">www.bpb.de</a>
Centrum edukacji obywatelskiej (Centre for Citizenship Education)	Poland	The Centre for Citizenship Education was founded in the 1990s with the intention to provide civic education during Poland's transitioning process to strengthen democratic values. Today, it is the largest educational NGO in Poland and provides teachers' training, support local projects and school councils. Its publishing house CIVITAS produces civic education books both for teachers and students.	Alicja Pacewicz - Founder	<a href="http://ceo.org.pl/english">ceo.org.pl/english</a>
Centrum občanského vzdělávání (Civic Education Centre)	Czech Republic	The Civic Education Centre was launched in 2009 with the idea to promote civic education through teachers' training. Part of their work is creating teachers guides and materials, providing study materials, carrying our conferences and research.	Petr Cáp - Former Director	<a href="http://www.obcanskevzdelavani.cz/english-version">http://www.obcanskevzdelavani.cz/english-version</a>

Name of the organisation	Geographical focus	Field of activity	Contact	Website
CIVES Foundation	Spain	The Cives Educational and Welfare Foundation works for the achievement of full citizenship in a social and democratic state under the rule of law. With this objective in mind, it promotes civic-ethical education based on democratic values, human rights, respect and solidarity. Cives delivers training for teachers in subjects related to civic-ethical education.	Victorino Mayoral - President	<a href="http://www.fundacioncives.org/">http://www.fundacioncives.org/</a>
Democracy and Human Rights Education in Europe Network (DARE)	Europe	DARE was officially launched in 2003 in Antwerp, Belgium and is a Europe-wide network of primarily NGOs, academic institutions and training providers devoted to promoting active democratic citizenship and human rights through formal education, non-formal and informal education, and life-long experience. The network currently consists of 36 members from 26 countries in Europe. The network is engaged in exchanging information, contents, methods and staff; sharing best practices and standards; advocating for education for democratic citizenship and human rights at the Council of Europe and the EU; creating common programmes for education and qualification of staff, board members and volunteers in member organisations.	Nils-Eyk Zimmermann - Secretary	<a href="https://dare-network.eu/the-dare-network/">https://dare-network.eu/the-dare-network/</a>

Name of the organisation	Geographical focus	Field of activity	Contact	Website
European Association for Viewers Interests (EAVI)	Europe	EAVI is an international non-profit organisation established in 2005 and based in Brussels which advocates media literacy and full citizenship. It supports the adoption of initiatives that enable citizens to read, write and participate in public life through the media. EAVI represents citizens interests in the European sphere through lobbying, conferences, networking, research, media literacy focused projects, development of good practices and production of online content of resources with a particular attention to the education of young people.	Paolo Celot - Secretary General and Founding Member	<a href="https://eavi.eu">https://eavi.eu</a>
ICCS 2016 Study on International Civic and Citizenship Education	Europe (and beyond)	ICCS 2016 was the fourth project conducted by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievements (IEA) in civic education. As the second cycle within the framework of the International Civic and Citizenship Education Study, ICCS 2016 monitored trends in civic knowledge and engagement over seven years in the countries that participated in ICCS 2009. The study assessed students enrolled in the eighth grade, provided that the average age of students at this year level is 13.5 years or above. In addition, ICCS drew samples of teachers in each school, with an option for teachers in subjects related to civic and citizenship education.	Prof Gabriella Agrusti and Dr Valeria Damiani - Authors of the report and members of the LUMSA University Research Group	<a href="https://www.iea.nl/studies/iea/iccs/2016#section-62">https://www.iea.nl/studies/iea/iccs/2016#section-62</a>

Name of the organisation	Geographical focus	Field of activity	Contact	Website
		<p>In total, 94.000 students and 37.000 teachers from 3.800 schools located in 24 countries worldwide took part in the study. European countries included Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, the Netherlands, Norway, Russia, Slovenia and Sweden.</p>		
<p>Jaan Tonisson Institute - Civic Education Centre</p>	<p>Estonia</p>	<p>Founded in 1993, the Jaan Tonisson Institute is now the oldest NGO in Estonia. The institute's primary aim was the provision of teachers' training during the restructuring of the subject in the 1990s. While they still deliver these trainings, they have added specific civic courses to their services as well as the publishing of textbooks.</p>	<p>Sulev Valdmaa - Founder</p>	<p><a href="http://www.jti.ee/en/civic-education-centre/">http://www.jti.ee/en/civic-education-centre/</a></p>
<p>Netwerk Democratie</p>	<p>the Netherlands</p>	<p>Netwerk Democratie is an organisation that works to develop a more participative democracy in the Netherlands, with a special focus on the role of technology. It also works with a network of Dutch and European partners to share knowledge and best practices on citizens participation, and organise critical debates on European and local issues related to democratic innovation. The organisation engages in different ways: through crowdfunding platforms and whistleblowing platforms, local governments, European Commission representatives. The organisation also hosts one of the Europe Direct offices active in the country.</p>	<p>Anne de Zeeuw - Co-President and Programme Coordinator</p>	<p><a href="https://netdem.nl/en/">https://netdem.nl/en/</a></p>

Name of the organisation	Geographical focus	Field of activity	Contact	Website
Občankáři	Czech Republic	Občankáři, which can be translated in English as “Association of Teachers of Civics and Social Sciences”, was founded in 2014 with the objective of creating a platform for teachers of civics and social sciences across the country where to find material to use in class, organising teachers’ trainings and events, and creating an environment to exchange best practices and networking.	Irena Eibenová - Co-Founder	<a href="https://www.obcankari.cz">https://www.obcankari.cz</a>
Österreichische Gesellschaft für politische Bildung (Austrian Society for Civic Education)	Austria	The Austrian Society for Civic Education was founded in 1977 as the first initiative for civic education. Since then, the civic education infrastructure in Austria has changed so that the Society now focuses on the provision of civic education for adults. It carries out workshops, supports and funds smaller civic education projects and delivers teachers’ training.	Rahel Baumgartner - Managing Director	<a href="http://www.politischebildung.at">www.politischebildung.at</a>
Values Unite	Germany	Values Unite was founded in 2020 with the goal to promote the idea of a European Agency for Citizenship Education. Their work includes research on civic education in the European Union as well as advocacy work for their idea.	Susanne Zels - Co- Founder	<a href="https://valuesunite.eu/">https://valuesunite.eu/</a>
Zentrum für politisch Bildung (Centre for Citizenship Education)	Luxembourg	The Centre for Citizenship Education was founded in 2016 with the objective to create a central contact point and provide high quality civic education in Luxembourg. The independent foundation publishes learning material, holds conferences and workshops, provides teachers training and cooperates with smaller initiatives to carry out projects.	Michèle Schilt - Deputy Director	<a href="http://www.zpb.lu">www.zpb.lu</a>



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