

Empowering Citizens in a Changing Media and Information Environment

Maximilian Conrad and Hulda Herjólfsdóttir Skogland (both University of Iceland); Alessia Chiriatti and Federico Castiglioni (both IAI Rome); Hrvoje Butkovic (IRMO Zagreb)

Key Takeaways

- Citizenship education in Europe constitutes a mosaic of different national and subnational approaches. In order to empower citizens against a manipulative media and information environment, more and better coordination at the EU level is necessary while at the same time respecting national and subnational competences in the area
- Considerable room for improvement exists in the field of teacher education on key skills needed to achieve the broader goal of empowering citizens, including media literacy, but also critical thinking and digital skills.
- Too little is known empirically about the effectiveness of national and subnational approaches to teaching such key skills; to remedy this situation, a testing tool is needed that can ascertain the extent to which students in different education systems are empowered to navigate the changing media and information landscape

RECLAIM summary

RECLAIM is a three-year research project (2022-2025) funded by the European Union's Horizon Europe program. Consisting of a consortium of researchers from thirteen partner universities around Europe, the RECLAIM project addresses the implications of the challenge of post-truth politics for the future of liberal democracy in Europe, in order to (a) produce theoretically and empirically robust visions for the future of liberal democratic institutions, (b) to reflect on the meaning of liberal democracy in the 21st century in Europe and, (c) to develop recommendations, toolkits, narratives and methodologies to reinstate the legitimacy and effectiveness of liberal democracies.

Analysis and findings

The RECLAIM project has researched approaches to citizenship education in various European countries: Croatia, Germany (represented by the subnational case of Bavaria), Iceland, Italy, and Bulgaria. In its analyses of the selected education systems, the RECLAIM project has drawn on the country expertise of the participating researchers, all of whom are natives and/or citizens of the respective countries that they have studied.

The project has analyzed policy documents, curricula and other existing guidelines to gain an understanding not only of how citizenship education is conceptualized, but also of how various key skills and competences needed to navigate the current media and information environment are addressed in the analyzed countries. Beyond fundamental democratic values such as respect for dissenting views, cultural diversity, gender sensitivity, etc., these key skills and competences include media literacy, digital skills, and critical thinking in relation to mis- and disinformation. The project's key added value lies in its novel insights into the gaps between the vision(s) expressed in citizenship education curricula and the challenges that teachers experience in teaching the relevant subjects.

Our analyses highlight the still highly diverse European landscape in terms of the organization of citizenship education and the differing emphasis placed on key skills such as media literacy, critical thinking, and digital skills. Some education systems teach citizenship education as a single subject, while others approach it as an overarching cross-curricular educational goal. Others use an integrated approach that combines elements of both. Our analysis of primary and secondary school curricula as well as the relevant policy documents demonstrates – albeit with some differences – an awareness of the challenges that the changing media and information environment poses. However, we also observe an urgent need to adapt the skills and competences to be acquired in the respective school systems to this changing environment. While these are spelled out in great detail in some cases, the goals to be achieved and the methods for achieving them often remain abstract. The significant added value of RECLAIM's analysis of citizenship education programs lies in its exploration of the considerable gaps between ambitious curricular visions and the lived experience of teachers involved in citizenship education. In practice, the ambitious goals expressed in curricula are often difficult to achieve due to lack of funding and available classroom hours devoted to media literacy and related skills. In addition, the interviewed teachers pointed out a lack of opportunities for learning how to teach these skills and competences. This calls for increased attention to teacher training, but also for stronger incentivization of additional training for subject teachers who are often not experts in media literacy.

Policy Recommendations

Based on our analyses, we propose three specific measures through which citizenship education in Europe can respond to the challenge of an increasingly manipulative media and information environment. As an important caveat, it has to be highlighted that this challenge is arguably most effectively addressed where education policy is actually shaped, i.e., at the national and subnational levels. However, such processes can and should be flanked by measures that can be adopted at the EU level.

Recommendation 1: A Teaching-Skills Toolkit for Teachers

First, we recommend the creation – at the European level – of a digital citizenship teaching-skills toolkit for teachers as well as an assessment toolkit. This tool should be geared towards enhancing the skills and competences of citizenship education teachers to teach key skills such as media literacy, critical thinking, and digital skills. This tool would furthermore be freely available for use by schools and other educational institutes or stakeholders, including ministries of education. Our analysis of citizenship education programs in the selected European countries has demonstrated that national and/or subnational curricula on citizenship education formulate ambitious goals regarding a range of relevant skills and competences. If achieved, these skills and competences – including media literacy, critical thinking, and digital skills, should empower the next generation to navigate the changing media and information environment and play their role as informed citizens in the democratic life of their respective communities. However, our interviews with teachers have revealed an apparent lack of educational opportunities for teachers who feel that they do not possess the adequate skills to teach such skills and competences effectively. Moreover, our analysis has revealed considerable room for improvement as regards creating incentives and opportunities to promote teachers' participation in existing educational opportunities.

The proposed development of a teaching-skills toolkit for teachers is a timely and cost-effective way to tackle gaps in the availability of coordinated educational opportunities. Similar toolkits exist at the level of individual (national and subnational) education systems, but they broadly reflect the (necessarily) fragmented educational landscape that is due to education policy being a national – and in some cases subnational – policy competence. Despite the EU's limited competences in the field of education, the EU – and in particular the European Commission – is well positioned to play a key role in the provision of such an instrument. In fact, efforts to coordinate such an approach at the European level would be a highly welcome step towards overcoming this unnecessarily fragmented landscape while still respecting the competences of the national and subnational levels in the field of education.

We therefore call upon the European Commission to launch the process of creating such a teaching skills toolkit – and to do so in a timely fashion.

Recommendation 2: A Media-Literacy Testing Tool

Second, we recommend the development – also at the EU level – of an assessment tool for the evaluation of individual education systems' performance in furnishing students with the skills and competences needed to navigate the changing media and information environment. Our interviews with teachers have shown that despite ambitious approaches towards this goal in national and subnational curricula, such approaches may not be sufficiently effective in achieving the desired goals. However, reliable data on the performance of (sub-)national education systems is missing. An assessment tool developed specifically for this purpose would fill this void and provide such much-needed data. Such a tool could and should be developed at the European level, but it should be available for use by schools and other educational facilities and/or stakeholders (including ministries of education). Moreover, it should form the basis of systematic assessments of the achievement of the educational goal of developing students' skills.

The EU has the opportunity to play a vanguard role in this respect and would therefore be the natural choice to take action. Ideally, this could be achieved within the framework of the EU's Eurydice network, which already today produces and publishes a rich array of comparative data and analyses on national education systems and specific topics in the field of education. The Eurydice network's work covers a total of 40 European countries, thus going far beyond the EU-27 member states. Because Eurydice is funded by the European Commission, it appears logical that the Commission should initiate work towards this goal, and the Commission could also promote the use of this tool by national and subnational educational authorities.

Recommendation 3: Development of a Civic Truth Lab toolkit

Third, we recommend – also at the European level – the development of a modular Citizenship Education Toolkit aimed at equipping young learners with skills and knowledge needed to navigate an increasingly complex digital and democratic environment. This toolkit would be targeted at primary and secondary school students and support the development of media literacy, critical thinking, civic engagement and intercultural competencies from an early age. In doing so, it would complement existing EU resources on digital education and citizenship, while offering an age-specific, classroom-ready instrument for schools and educators.

Our analysis has shown that, while many national and subnational curricula emphasize the importance of such competencies, their

practical implementation often remains fragmented, uneven, or heavily reliant on extracurricular activities. Furthermore, the inclusion of structural approaches to counter disinformation is either absent or inconsistently applied. The proposed toolkit addresses this gap by offering a flexible, scalable instrument that could be adapted across educational systems, and delivered through a combination of digital tools (apps, games), hands-on activities (simulations, workshops) and collaborative tasks (classrooms campaigns, forums).

The proposed toolkit would include both student-facing materials (e.g. “Fake News Challenge”, “Adopt a Hoax” campaigns) and educator support tools (e.g. teachers’ guide, glossary of disinformation terms, evaluation templates).

Despite the EU’s limited competencies in education, the European Commission is uniquely positioned to act as a facilitator and coordinator of such an initiative. By launching the development of this Toolkit – in collaboration with national ministries, schools, and civil society actors – the Commission would take a decisive step towards strengthening citizenship education and democratic resilience across the Union. We therefore urge the Commission to initiate this process without delay.

Existing initiatives

The European Commission’s 2025 Action Plan on Basic Skills addresses the critical need to enhance basic skills among youth and adults across the EU. The Action Plan’s comprehensive approach to improving literacy, numeracy, science, digital, and citizenship skills is commendable, as it aims to bolster Europe’s competitiveness and social cohesion. However, while the Action Plan effectively highlights the importance of these foundational skills, we propose a more focused enhancement in the realm of citizenship education. Specifically, we recommend that the Action Plan take a firmer step in defining digital citizenship education and media literacy as essential components of basic skills for 14-16 year old pupils during the pre-voting age years or last years of compulsory schooling. In today’s rapidly evolving digital landscape, proficiency in digital citizenship and media literacy is crucial for young individuals to navigate the complexities of online environments, critically evaluate information, and participate responsibly in democratic processes. By taking a firmer stance on the need to integrate these skills into the core curriculum and potentially defining them as basic skills in common international projects and action plans, the 2025 EU Commission Action Plan can better prepare young citizens to safeguard European values and democracy, particularly in the face of rising political polarization, eroded trust in institutions, and increasing information manipulation. Strengthening the focus of the action plan on digital citizenship education and

media literacy will not only enhance individual competencies but also contribute significantly to the resilience and integrity of European societies.

Obstacles

One key obstacle in implementing these recommendations is connected to the location of policy competences in the field of education. The EU’s role in the field of education policy is limited, as the policy area is largely a national or, in some federal systems, a subnational competence. Nevertheless, the EU does play an important role in monitoring education policy and the performance of education systems in the member states. Consequently, one key obstacle that needs to be overcome in formulating policy responses in the field of citizenship education is to maximize the EU’s potential role while also respecting the policy competences of the member states (or of the subnational level within member states). It will be of crucial importance to highlight the voluntary nature of using the proposed testing tool, but – similar to other Eurydice projects – if funding is available, there is little that speaks against the use of this tool by the participating (member or non-member) states.



RECLAIM is a Research and Innovation Action funded by the EU's Horizon Europe programme under Grant Agreement no. 101061330. The views and opinions expressed in this policy brief are those of the authors only and do not necessarily reflect the opinion of the European Union or the Research Executive Agency. Neither the European Union nor the Research Executive Agency can be held responsible for them.