

## DEMOCRACY IN ACTION: A Conference On Global Citizenship Education

3 December 2024, European Parliament, Brussels

### Welcoming Remarks

**Elisa Gambardella (SOLIDAR Foundation)** opened the conference by welcoming all participants and introducing the programme, and speakers.

She then passed the word to **MEP Marcos Ros Sempere** (S&D Group) who stressed the importance of Global Citizenship Education (GCE) to both support democratic engagement and strengthen democracy in the European Union, especially given the current political climate. He mentioned the European Parliament's [Resolution of 6 April 2022 on the Implementation of Citizenship Education Actions](#), underlining the need for a common framework for the implementation of GCE for Member States, the importance of teacher training, and the sharing of good practices in this regard. He highlighted the need for integrating GCE in vocational education and training programmes, and praised [SOLIDAR Foundation's Policy Paper on GCE](#) as a tool to help understand the existing challenges GCE faces and how to overcome them. He concluded his intervention by saying that he will continue his work on strengthening GCE in order to ensure everyone's democratic participation regardless of one's citizenship status.

### Presentation of the Policy Paper's Main Findings & Policy Recommendations

Researcher **Elizaveta Ebner** introduced the main findings and policy recommendations from the policy paper. She explained that the need for this Policy Paper stems from, on the one hand, **the challenges youth democratic participation is currently facing**, as data shows that in 2024 turnout of young people in the EU elections decreased, while young people that voted, voted for parties often criticised for their anti-democratic narratives. This is backed by the global trend that young people are increasingly disappointed in democracy and that democracies are in decline. On the other hand, **education is one of the EU priorities in promoting democratic participation** among youth. The Policy Paper aimed to provide an overview of the **currently available evidence** on the impact of GCE on democratic participation, to map **GCE policy developments in the EU**, and offer **policy recommendations** on improving GCE policies and practices across all types of education in the EU to strengthen democratic participation.

Elizaveta underscored that findings show that **education can significantly affect civic engagement**, such as voting, motivation to vote, civic attitudes and behaviour. Moreover, findings illustrate that what works best for strengthening civic engagement through education is the whole school approach, implying an inclusive and democratic school climate and governance, teaching and learning, as well as cooperation with communities and families. Moreover, a cross-curricular approach with trust among staff, students and parents has proven to be beneficial, as have participatory approaches and experiential learning, and teacher training teachers in all stages of their professional development. Elizaveta pointed out that citizenship education is particularly important for reaching underprivileged students as it makes the most difference. Last but not least, she stressed that evidence confirmed the positive effect enhanced cooperation between formal and non-formal actors has.

In terms of **EU policies on the topic of (Global) Citizenship Education**, Elizaveta mentioned that EU policies on citizenship education provide an added value, including coordination opportunities and the exchange of experiences. She points out that citizenship education is integral to EU strategic frameworks and policies, such as the European Education Area by 2025, Global Education 2050 Framework, Youth Strategy 2019 – 2027, Resolutions (on Learning EU at school 2021, on the implementation of citizenship education actions 2022), Paris Declaration on promoting citizenship and the common values of freedom, tolerance and non-discrimination through education (2015), Eurydice reports. However, citizenship education is still largely missing in policies related to Vocational Education and Training (VET). Though it is part of many EU strategic frameworks and policies, **citizenship education remains a matter of general objectives and scattered recommendations rather than an action plan**. There is no programmatic document that would offer the EU's perspective on citizenship education with clear milestones and quality criteria, which is a call made by the EU Parliament that calls for the creation of a programmatic document - [2022 "Resolution on the implementation of citizenship education actions"](#), also mentioned by MEP Ros Sempere.

Elizaveta concluded that GCE is a relevant approach for EU policies that could strengthen global and European dimensions in the education policies of Member States and enhance democratic engagement. In order to do so, the EU needs to follow up on its own agenda and develop a programmatic document and policies on citizenship education that include:

- a) Clear quality criteria, benchmarks and definitions.
- b) Focus on EU priorities: democratic, global and European dimensions
- c) Citizenship education in pre-service and in-service teacher training
- d) Participatory and experiential approach
- e) Whole school and cross-curricular approach
- f) Particular attention to the democratic engagement of underprivileged students
- g) VET standards
- h) Cooperation with the CoE (also in VET area – CoE Education Strategy 2030)
- i) Better cohesion among the available GCE funding schemes for non-formal education actors, as well as for research on citizenship education in the EU

## Roundtable Discussion

A Roundtable discussion on the topic of **Global Citizenship Education as a catalyst of democratic participation** then took place chaired by **Elisa Gambardella** (SOLIDAR Foundation) with the participation of **Alexandra Biris**, (Policy Officer, DG EAC), **Liam Wegimont** (Executive Director, [GENE](#)) and **Isabelle Palancon** (International Department, [CEMEA France](#)).

In her intervention **Alexandra Biris (DG EAC)** drew attention to the [2023 Council Conclusions on the contribution of education & training to strengthening common European values and democratic citizenship](#) where the Council explicitly called for attaching more **importance and relevance to the role of education & training in fostering EU values and democratic participation**. On the topic of a common definition on GCE, she stressed that the European Commission understands citizenship education as inherently involving a global perspective, due to us living in an increasingly globalised world and all members of society needing to have better awareness about

how their actions and decisions impact society on a wider scale. Though education and training remains an exclusive competence of the Member States, the European Commission does play a role, as it can create room for discussion, make funding available and disseminate best practices on (G)CE. She added that this is something that the Commission is planning to continue doing in the next cycle of the European Education Area (EEA), as during its ongoing evaluation, citizenship education has consistently emerged as a key point in the discussions. She invited participants to keep an eye on the final report on the EEA's review which will be published next year, and will give an insight in how EU cooperation has worked so far and give a basis of discussion for the EEA's second cycle (2026-2030).

While many aspects are still uncertain since the new European Commission has just begun its term, it is evident that protecting democracy is a key priority, with a strong focus on topics such as civic engagement, particularly that of children and youth, and fighting disinformation. This makes citizenship education crucial. She also pointed out that **civil society organisations (CSOs) and non-formal education are vital in addressing the gaps in citizenship education implementation**. In this context, she emphasized the need for collaboration among all stakeholders, advocating for a **community-wide approach**, as highlighted in the 2023 Council Conclusions mentioned earlier.

Regarding **citizenship education funding programmes**, she said that the different programmes should exist in synergy with one another and that the European Commission is working across DGs in order to achieve this. She provided participants with an overview of existing [EU funding for citizenship education](#). As the European Commission is currently undergoing a transition period, there is not much information available regarding potential future funding on this topic or the new Multiannual Financial Framework. However, she did mention that valuable lessons have been learned about the **significance of citizenship education in fostering a democratic and resilient society and promoting common European values**.

In discussing the need to harmonize the Commission's strong focus on education that develops skills for increased competitiveness and the labor market with a broader perspective on education and lifelong learning – one that values transversal competencies vital for strengthening democratic societies, including those provided by Global Citizenship Education (GCE) – she emphasized that there should be no trade-off between these two approaches. Transversal skills are crucial not only for personal development and fulfillment but also for employment, which in turn contributes to competitiveness and prosperity. This point was also highlighted in [the Draghi report](#), which argued for closing the skills gap and underscored the significance of transversal skills in the labor market.

In order to ensure concretely that these competences are not left behind and to underpin by evidence the positive results of citizenship education on strengthening democracies, is to monitor them, as expressed in the 2023 Council Conclusions. Discussions among Member States on potential indicators to monitor citizenship competences have taken place within the context of the Standing Group on Indicators and Benchmarks (SGIB). To

have specific indicators on citizenship education would enable to monitor them systematically. Concerning practices of Member States on the topic, she gave the [2017 Eurydice Report on Citizenship Education at School in Europe](#) as an example, and highlighted that Eurydice is working on a new version of the report to be published in 2026, which is to provide data and an overview of state of play among Member States. Moreover, Alexandra mentioned that the EC is preparing a study to explore the possibility of developing a comprehensive competence framework which is specific to the context of the EU and also exploring possibilities of putting together guidelines, as called for in the Council Conclusions, on methodology, content, and teacher training related to citizenship education.

**Liam Wegimont (GENE)** pointed out that [the Dublin Declaration](#) actively tries to undermine policy silos and contribute to the participatory nature of GCE. The Declaration tries to bring together competing definitions of Global Citizenship Education and see how these can work together. He observed that education ministries and foreign affairs policymakers are increasingly collaborating to create national strategies. From GENE's perspective, a European-wide framework for citizenship education is not the most effective approach; instead, a country-by-country and sector-by-sector strategy is more beneficial.

Liam expressed his hope that formal education will evolve to resemble the emancipatory spaces that non-formal learning organizations, such as those focused on Global Citizenship Education (GCE), provide. He noted that there is a **growing body of evidence on GCE** and points out the work that the [ANGEL \(Academic Network on Global Education & Learning\) Network](#) has been carrying out in this regard. He also mentioned the upcoming [International Civic and Citizen Education Study \(ICCS\) 2027](#) which will provide insight into young people's civic knowledge, attitudes and engagement.

He noted that one of the key obstacles for **engaging Civil Society Organisations in governance of education policies** is that the culture of policy development and engagement differs from country to country. GENE tries to tackle this problem through its peer review processes involving relevant stakeholders such as CSOs but also local and regional governments.

**Isabelle Palanchon (CEMEA France)** gave an overview of CEMEA's work on GCE, entailing intercultural and geopolitical learning and international mobility. She explained that her organisation works on the topic on different levels, namely the one of linking local and global citizenship, and how one contribute and participate with active citizenship at the local level, and the feeling of belonging to a global community by working with young people. She noted that the **Erasmus+ programme** is the main financial support to carry out this work, and is a well framed programme to do so thanks to its different stakeholders.

She pointed out that matters such as bringing people from different countries in touch with one another and exchanging views, building international friendship, and critical thinking lie at the core of the popular education movement. CEMEA has gained several

years of experience in working on how **non-formal education methods and active pedagogies can impact active citizenship**. During this experimentation, CEMEA worked on which pedagogical practices can bring social changes and emancipation. She gave the example of awareness raising by learning through reflective methods; knowing that you know, is better than knowing, as when one is aware of your knowledge you can transfer it in another field; leading to emancipation. Isabelle also stressed the collective dimension of popular education, as this dimension is the only way to achieve socio-economic changes.

An obstacle she identified in this regard is **the recognition of non-formal and informal learning**, as there is a need for a framework to recognise citizenship learning; not just in terms of competences for the labour market but also in terms of participation in society. There is a need for educators to have the capacity to organise reflective processes and safe spaces of learning. As another challenge, Isabelle, gave the increasing **commodification of education** as an example, as this pushes stakeholders to cost efficient activities. This is at odds of what **education** should be which is **a public and common good**, especially for learners with vulnerable backgrounds.

Isabelle touched upon how **EU cooperation is an added value to citizenship education** as it enables sharing of practices and experiences on GCE among stakeholders from different countries. This way partners can learn from each other and address better the learners' needs. Moreover, this cooperation helps educators in bringing young people from different backgrounds in touch with diversity and differences, and give them a window on the world. She stressed that such cooperation is pivotal since the current societal issues we are facing are international and we need a global and crosscutting vision to be able to cooperate on them.

To conclude, Isabelle noted that democratic participation and citizenship education are linked. CEMEA focuses on fostering a democratic culture rather than just democratic education. There are various forms of democracy, including direct, representative, and sociocracy, which is based on consensus. In youth exchanges and schools, CEMEA encourages young people to explore and experience different types of democracy. NFIL can bring political education to life, and it is crucial to start this process early. Through experience, individuals will progress towards Global Citizenship Education (GCE). Additionally, Isabelle remarked that educating young people about international citizenship is increasingly **challenging due to the current political climate**, where some states violate human rights without consequences. She stressed that a concerted effort must be made to **enhance digital education**, as we are not fully aware of what is happening online and how to prepare young people to be ethical citizens in these digital spaces.

## Q&A

A round of questions of participants followed touching upon the possibility to work on citizenship education in different and varying political contexts.

## Concluding Remarks – Mikael Leyi, Secretary General, SOLIDAR & SOLIDAR Foundation

In his concluding remarks, **Mikael Leyi (SOLIDAR Foundation)**, agreed with the ideal scenario where Global Citizenship Education (GCE) policies are harmonious and well-established. Though he posed the question on how this can be achieved. We find ourselves in a situation where human rights and international organizations have become politicized, which poses challenges and impacts both marginalized groups and civil society as a whole. When governments come to power, one of their first targets is often popular education movements. This calls for the need to reconfigure this narrative, **making human rights a non-political issue** – something that should be universally accepted.

He also pointed out that we are facing budget cuts and a shrinking space for civil society. While we all hope for increased funding, there is a genuine concern that the current trends may lead to further reductions. This creates **a complex environment where we must continue advocating for GCE**, and gives us more reasons to intensify our efforts. One of the reasons SOLIDAR Foundation initiated an Informal Alliance on GCE is to support like-minded organizations in promoting GCE.

He concluded that SOLIDAR Foundation will keep producing policy papers on the topic and will focus on the relationship between GCE and individuals from vulnerable backgrounds in next year's policy paper. We should **celebrate the importance of GCE and keep the conversation going about the need for a framework at the EU level.**