Civic Education *in Vocational Education and Training*
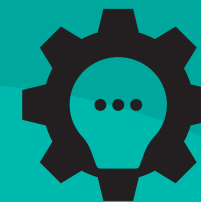
Improving Civics in VET

Comparative Study of European Practices

ENG / CRO / GER / ROM

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INTRODUCTION

The European Parliament elections, held from June 6 to 9 this year, were marked by the strengthening of far-right political parties, prompting numerous analysts to express concerns about the future of the European Union and the survival of the liberal democratic regime that underpins this community. The crisis of liberal democracy has long been a subject of numerous political analyses and research, and today we have many studies (e.g., Tormey, 2015; Mounk, 2018; Fukuyama, 2021) that provide insights into the indicators, causes, and consequences of this crisis. Almost all these studies agree that the stable and effective functioning of liberal democratic political systems largely, if not crucially, depends on the existence of a democratic political culture. The core of this culture consists of citizens who possess the knowledge, intellectual and participatory abilities, and the values and attitudes necessary for informed and responsible participation in political processes. The main challenge for contemporary liberal-democratic orders lies in the fact that such citizens are not born; their existence should not be taken for granted but rather is potentially developed through political socialization processes.

One of the most important agents of socialization that should foster the development of a democratic political culture is the educational system. Since the inception of the first public educational systems, which emerged at the end of the 18th century due to the impacts of the French and Industrial Revolutions, these systems were tasked with two main objectives (Šalaj, 2018). The first can be termed socio-economic, involving the preparation of a qualified workforce that can meet the needs of the labor market and entrepreneurs. The second objective can be described as socio-cultural, which pertains to preparing young people for the role of active, informed, and responsible citizens ready to participate in the political process. To better fulfill this socio-cultural function, liberal-democratic regimes throughout the 20th century began introducing civic education programs into their educational systems (Osler & Starkey, 2005). Consequently, civic education became the primary channel for promoting democratic political culture within liberal-democratic political systems. This pivotal role of civic education has attracted the interest of numerous researchers, who, in their academic works, have explored various aspects of implementing this type of education (e.g., Rapeli, 2014; Lupia, 2016).

One part of the findings from the mentioned research highlights a serious challenge that liberal-democratic orders will face in the future. This challenge pertains to civic education being neglected within a portion of the public education system - specifically in vocational education and training (VET) or vocational schools. For instance, one of the most comprehensive studies on civic education in European countries (Eurydice Report, 2017a), which describes the situation in as many as 36 countries, notes that in most of the analyzed states, "educational authorities devote less attention to civic education in vocational schools compared to other types of schools" (10).

This neglect of civic education in vocational schools represents a serious flaw in building a democratic political culture. This fact is supported by research findings that suggest that vocational school students have significant deficiencies in their political competencies. For instance, studies on the political literacy of final-year high school students in Croatia, conducted at three different points in time, consistently and clearly show that vocational school students perform statistically worse than general (grammar) school students (Šalaj, Gvozdanović, and Horvat, 2024).

Given all the considerations, this study focuses on civic education in vocational schools. Notably, a significant number of students in most European countries attend vocational schools, making it crucial for the future development and survival of liberal democracy that these students also have access to quality civic education. To evaluate the current situation, we conducted a comparative analysis of civic education in vocational schools across seven European countries: Austria, Croatia, England, Germany, Italy, Norway, and Romania.[1] By selecting these countries, we have included diverse geographical areas in Europe and have incorporated both "old" and "new" European democracies.

In methodological terms, the study will rely on two main methods. The first is desk research, which involves the analysis of two types of sources. The first type includes official documents such as laws, regulations, rules, curricula, syllabi, and similar materials. The second type comprises academic articles and books that address civic education, particularly those focusing on civic education in vocational schools. The desk research analysis will be supplemented by consulting key informants - experts from academia, think tanks, and advocacy organizations - who will provide additional insights into their respective countries. We will conduct 11 interviews with key informants from the countries included in the analysis.

With this study, we aim to provide the interested public with insights into the current state of civic education in European countries, stimulate discussion about the quality of this education, and, most importantly, suggest possible ways to improve the quality of civic education in vocational schools.[2] In addition to the introduction, the study is organized into several major sections. The second section of the study serves as a theoretical framework where we connect the concepts of democracy, democratic political culture, political literacy, education, vocational education, and civic education. In the paper's third section, we outline the basic structure of the educational systems of the countries included in the analysis, focusing specifically on public, formal education systems. After describing the basic structure, we delve into the secondary level of education, paying particular attention to the different types of schools present at this level in the analyzed countries. In the fourth section, we focus on vocational schools in the countries covered by the analysis. The fifth section addresses civic education in these vocational schools. In the sixth section, we summarize key insights from the previous chapters. All these findings will culminate in the final seventh section, where we present our recommendations for enhancing civic education in vocational schools.

1   In Germany, responsibility for education lies with the 16 states (Länder), each with its system, which has the same basic structure but differs in certain aspects. In this study, the data for Germany pertains to the state of Thuringia.

2   In this study, acknowledging that the responsibility for educational systems, including civic education, predominantly lies within the jurisdiction of national states, we will focus specifically on that level. Therefore, we will not address the efforts of international organizations, such as the Council of Europe, which also undertake specific projects in civic education.

KEY CONCEPTS

Probably the most important theorist of democracy in the 20th century, American political scientist Robert Dahl, describes democracy in his book *Democracy and Its Critics* (1989) as a political regime in which all those affected by a decision participate in the decision-making process. In the same book, Dahl states that democratic theory is a field of research, analysis, theorizing, and empirical description of the democratic idea and democratic political systems. The democratic theory thus encompasses numerous questions, with this study primarily focusing on the conditions that favor the stable and effective functioning of democratic political systems. A review of research attempting to answer this question suggests the existence of specific differences among researchers, stemming from the fact that specific groups of authors emphasize certain factors as the most important in explaining the functioning of democratic systems. Vujčić (2001) notes that one group considers institutions and institutional design as the most important, another emphasizes socio-economic factors, while a third highlights socio-cultural factors.

In this study, we are interested in the impact of socio-cultural factors on the functioning of democracy.[3] The idea that the functioning of a political community depends not only on the better or worse arrangement of institutions but also on the sphere where citizens' activity is expressed and where the fundamental political values, symbols, and sentiments of the community members are manifested, was already shaped in ancient Greek political philosophy (Šalaj, 2007; Ober, 2017). However, a systematic explication and empirical verification of the role of socio-cultural factors in the performance of democracy were carried out by American political scientists Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba in their well-known study *The Civic Culture* (1963). In this study, Almond and Verba introduced the concept of political culture into social sciences, defining it as the particular distribution of orientations toward political objects among the members of a nation (21). Their comparative study of political life in five different countries led the authors to the conclusion that the development of a stable and effective democratic government does not depend on the structure of government and politics; it depends on the orientations of the people toward the political process—on the political culture. If the political culture cannot support a democratic system, the chances for that system's success are slim (365).

After the study's publication, political culture became extremely popular and frequently used in research, recognizing a political-cultural approach within the social sciences (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005; Vujčić, 2001; 2008). While some researchers remained within the fundamental theses of the political-cultural approach, they incorporated other concepts into their studies, such as social capital (Putnam, 1993; 2000), social trust (Fukuyama, 1995), political literacy (Crick & Lister, 1978; Crick, 2000; Milner, 2002), civic competence (Lupia, 2016), and so on. This study will not delve into the differences and similarities among these concepts. However, we will focus on the fact that all these terms express the idea that this subjective dimension of politics, which includes citizens' knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values, is crucial for the proper functioning of democracy.

Considering the importance of this socio-cultural dimension of politics, it is logical to ask how it develops. Citizens are not born with a developed democratic political culture or civic competence; instead, these can potentially be developed through processes referred to as political socialization (Greenstein, 1969; Jennings & Niemi, 1981). This concept arose from the understanding that people are not born with innate knowledge, attitudes, and values about politics. Suppose we understand socialization as the process encompassing all societal influences on young people through which they integrate into society. In that case, as the process by which young people "grow into" the society they live in, political socialization can similarly be defined as the process of young people "growing into" politics as a specific sphere of society. One key insight that significantly influenced the development of political socialization research is the realization that political socialization is not a one-dimensional process but a complex one and that political culture is acquired, developed, and changed under the influence of many factors. A review of the literature on political socialization (Dekker, 1991; Sigel, 1995) suggests several key factors, including the family, peer groups, the education system, mass media, religion, and the business system.

In this study, we are primarily interested in education's role in political socialization, specifically public education systems. As we have already emphasized in the introduction, since the inception of formal public education systems, one of the main tasks of these systems has been to prepare new generations to take on the role of active and responsible citizens, competent to participate in the political process. In other words, the entire public education system is key to developing a democratic political culture among new generations. Schools introduce students to governance, citizenship, and political participation. They provide a structured environment where young people can learn about their role in society and the importance of civic engagement.

Over time, particularly in the period following World War II, the idea emerged within democratic political communities that a specific segment of the public education system should be dedicated to preparing young people to become active citizens. This segment is called civic education (Crick, 2000; Galston, 2001).[4] Discussions about civic education gained importance with the expansion of voting rights, especially with the introduction of universal suffrage. In a situation where all citizens are allowed to participate, at least indirectly, in the governance of the political community of which they are members, the question of how competent citizens are for this role becomes crucial. To guide the development of the political culture of younger generations toward its democratic form, many countries have incorporated civic education programs into their school systems, particularly since the end of World War II (Šalaj,

3   In this study, following contemporary political science understandings (e.g., Zakaria, 2007; Ravlić, 2017; Mounk, 2018), we understand democracy as liberal democracy. The democratic segment emphasizes popular sovereignty and the equality of citizens, while the liberal aspect underscores the importance of individual rights and freedoms. The democratic tradition stems from the idea that the highest power in a political community should rest in the hands of the people, who, directly or through their representatives, decide on all significant political matters. The liberal tradition is based on the idea that individuals should be protected from arbitrary use of power through constitutional and legal constraints, even in cases where that power has democratic legitimacy.

4   Of course, civic education did not only arise in the 20th century; something akin to the concept of civic education has existed since people began to discuss and write about politics. This interest stems from the fact that all politically organized societies have faced, and continue to face, the challenge of preparing individuals for social and political participation. A review of the history of political thought (Heater, 2003) reveals that numerous authors (e.g., Aristotle, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Thomas Jefferson, etc.) have addressed the role of education in preparing citizens for participation in public life.

2002). Civic education is thus defined (e.g., Gutmann, 1987; Crick, 2000) as a segment of the educational system whose primary task is to enable individuals to acquire the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values that are prerequisites for participation in the social and political processes of the communities in which they live.

Two questions are crucial for the discussion on the status of civic education in public school systems. The first relates to the types, and the second to the models of civic education (Šalaj, 2002; Eurydice Report, 2017a; 2017b). The discussion about types addresses the content of civic education, arising from the fact that different content can promote different goals. For example, civic education can strengthen allegiance to the current political order or encourage critical thinking about society and politics. Any civic education program that promotes active citizenship will inherently reflect the ideal of citizenship and society that the program's creators believe to be the best (Davies, Gregory, and Riley, 1999; Westheimer, 2015). Most analyses (Patrick, 1977; Harber, 1991; Maitles, 1999; Šalaj, 2002; Eurydice Report, 2017a) that have researched the types of civic education agree that four main content dimensions can be identified. These are knowledge, intellectual skills, participatory skills, and attitudes. The existence of distinct types of civic education stems from the fact that specific programs vary in the time and space devoted to each of these dimensions.

Different models of civic education arise from the various ways this type of education is implemented within school systems, reflecting different understandings of the nature and importance of civic education for the overall school system. Based on the current practices of implementing civic education in the school systems of democratic political communities, three main models can be identified (Šalaj, 2002; Eurydice Report, 2017b). In the first model, civic education exists within the school system but is not part of an explicit curriculum. The assumption is that students will develop the necessary knowledge, skills, and attitudes because of the schooling process. According to this model, it is expected that some aspects of the school system— such as the everyday atmosphere and life in the school,

classroom ethos, the organization of the school, and the manner of interaction and communication between teachers and students—if organized democratically, will be sufficient to foster the development of a democratic political culture among students. In the second model, civic education is explicitly introduced into the curriculum. It is an educational principle that should permeate the entire curriculum, covering all subjects, from mathematics to art education. For this reason, this model is also referred to as cross-curricular. In the third and most straightforward model, civic education is delivered through one or more separate school subjects.

In this study, we are particularly interested in the status of civic education within the vocational education and training segment. Why do we consider this issue crucial for the future development of democratic political culture in liberal democratic systems? The answer lies in the specific nature of the main goals of vocational education. At a certain point within their educational systems, all countries begin to categorize students into different types of education. After the portion familiar to all students, usually referred to as primary education, which varies in duration across different countries, the start of secondary education brings about a differentiation of students into different types of education or different types of schools. The most important distinction for this study is between schools that provide general education, often called grammar schools, and those that offer vocational education.

The most significant differences between general and vocational schools are evident in the primary goals and functions of these schools (Grubb, 1996; Dehmel, 2005; Brockmann, Clarke, and Winch, 2008; Biesta, 2009; CEDEFOP, 2014; Brescianini, 2023). General education, sometimes called academic education, imparts theoretical knowledge and insights to ensure that students acquire a broad understanding of various fields. In this context, students are encouraged to develop critical thinking and analytical skills, meaning the focus is on the overall intellectual development of the students. The main goal of this type of education is not to prepare students for a specific profession but rather to serve as a foundation for continuing education at higher levels,

such as universities and colleges, i.e., at the tertiary level. In line with these goals, professors and teachers typically conduct teaching through lectures.

In contrast to general education, vocational education focuses on developing students' practical knowledge and skills to ensure that students are ready to enter the labor market upon graduation. Vocational education is usually defined as all education that aims to equip people with knowledge, know-how, skills, and competencies required in a particular job or, more broadly, in the labor market (CEDEFOP, 2014). During this type of education, students acquire the practical knowledge and skills necessary to perform specific jobs, meaning that after completing their education, they are prepared to work in a particular profession or occupation (for example, electrician, construction worker, baker, hairdresser, etc.). In vocational schools, the emphasis is on hands-on work, with a significant portion of the teaching conducted through experiential learning. Part of the instruction is conducted in collaboration with companies and employers through internship and apprenticeship models. This approach aims to bring students closer to real-world work experiences during their education.

The aforementioned suggests that vocational education is specifically designed to prepare students for a swift entry into the labor market, with its primary function being socio-economic, meaning that the main goal is to prepare a skilled workforce to meet the needs of the labor market. However, what happens to the socio-cultural function in such schools, specifically preparing young people to be active citizens? Is this aspect neglected, or are there elements of civic education present in this type of school, the existence of which is essential for promoting a democratic political culture?

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EDUCATIONAL SYSTEMS

In the third part of the paper, we outline the basic structure of the educational systems of the countries included in the analysis. Here, we focus on public, formal education systems. After describing the basic structure, we delve into the secondary level of education, with a particular interest in the different types of schools in the analyzed countries at this level.

For easier comparison, we will use a categorization known as the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED). It is a classification developed by UNESCO and is used to categorize and compare educational systems across different countries (Schneider, 2008: UNESCO, 2012). The ISCED classification allows for the standardization of education data internationally, facilitating the analysis and comparison of educational systems across different countries. This classification structures educational systems into nine levels, from level 0 to level 8. Level 0 is early childhood education, which includes programs designed for young children, typically before the start of compulsory primary education. The highest level is level 8, the doctoral level, representing the highest level of tertiary education, including doctoral studies and similar research-focused programs.

In this study, we are interested in levels 1, 2, and 3, focusing on level 3. ISCED 1 denotes primary education, the first stage of formal education, usually starting between ages six and seven, focusing on basic literacy, numeracy, and fundamental skills. ISCED 2 denotes lower-secondary education. This level follows primary education and precedes upper secondary education. It typically focuses on general education but may also include the beginning of vocational education. ISCED 3 designates upper secondary education. This level includes the later stages of secondary education, covering both general education, often referred to as high school and vocational education. The goal is to prepare students either for tertiary education or for entering the labor market.

Table 1 presents the basic data on the countries included in the analysis. The first column indicates the age at which students must start attending school, the second lists the total duration of compulsory education, and the third, fourth, and fifth columns indicate the duration of primary, lower secondary, and upper secondary education (ISCED 1, 2, and 3). In the final column, the duration of general academic education is listed first, followed by the duration of vocational education.

	Starting age for compulsory education	Duration of compulsory education (years)	Duration of primary education (years) ISCED 1	Duration of lower secondary education (years) ISCED 2	Duration of upper secondary education (years) ISCED 3
Austria	6	9	4	4	4/3-5
Croatia	6	8	4	4	4/3-4
England	5	11	6	3	2/2-3
Germany	6	10	4	6	2-3/3
Italy	6	10	5	3	5/3-5
Norway	6	10	7	3	3/2+2
Romania	6	11	4	4	4/3-5

The analysis of the educational systems of the included countries suggests that vocational education takes place at both lower and upper secondary education levels, with the majority occurring at the upper secondary level, specifically at the ISCED 3 level. In addition, in some countries, vocational education is offered at the ISCED level 4, which encompasses post-secondary non-tertiary education. This level of education is above upper secondary but not yet tertiary education, and it includes vocational and technical programs that prepare students for the labor market or further education.

However, the vast majority of vocational education in all the countries the analysis covers takes place at the upper secondary level (ISCED 3). Therefore, the rest of the study will focus on this level. Generally speaking, schools at the ISCED 3 level can be divided into two major groups in all the countries the analysis covers. The first group includes schools that provide general education, which students usually complete by passing national exams, enabling them to compete for further education at the tertiary level. The second group consists of vocational schools, where students, upon completion, receive a qualification for a specific occupation or trade.

4

VOCATIONAL SCHOOLS

In the fourth part, we focus on vocational schools in the countries covered by the analysis. In doing so, we will seek to answer questions related to the different types of vocational schools, their social attractiveness, the duration of vocational education, the ratio between general and vocational content within the curriculum, and the ratio between classroom learning time and the practical aspects of education, namely, time spent at the workplace.

It should be noted that the analysis of vocational education is very complex for two reasons. The first reason is that in all the countries included in the analysis, vocational education at the ISCED 3 level is highly diverse, with various schools and programs available for students. The second related reason is that authorities in vocational education are often divided between central and regional governments.

We decided to simplify such a complex situation by focusing this study on vocational schools that share two characteristics. The first relates to the fact that students, upon finishing these schools, qualify for a specific occupation or trade. However, they cannot continue their education directly at higher levels.[5] In other words, these schools aim to prepare young people for the labor market. The second important characteristic is that this vocational school combines classroom instruction with workplace-based practice. Why did we choose this type of school? In this type of school—where most students complete their formal education and enter the labor market—there is a unique challenge in delivering quality civic education, mainly because students must combine school-based learning with hands-on practice.

5   In most countries, some options allow students who have completed this type of school to continue their education at higher levels. However, in these options, students must meet certain conditions before gaining the right to enroll in higher education, which typically involves attending and passing additional educational programs. As a result, only a minimal number of students choose these options.

Table 2 lists the types of vocational schools we focused on in each country covered by the study. Additionally, we have answered the questions outlined at the beginning of this chapter. These answers are based on an analysis of vocational education at the ISCED 3 level that we conducted, with a detailed description for each of the listed countries available in the Appendix.

Before moving on to civic education, we will note similarities in the organization of vocational education at the ISCED 3 level in the countries covered by the analysis. We emphasize the following insights. First, in most countries covered by the research, vocational education at ISCED level 3 begins in the ninth year of students' schooling, with exceptions in Norway and England, where it starts in the eleventh year. Second, this type of education ranges from 2 to 4 years, apart from some programs in Italy that last five years. However, most programs last three years, meaning that in most countries, young people complete their education and enter the labor market at approximately 17 years of age. Third, vocational education is viewed as less valuable in most countries than general secondary education, preparing students for further studies. Nonetheless, vocational education is attractive to a portion of students, particularly those who wish to enter the labor market as soon as possible. This is evidenced by the percentages of students attending such types of schools. These percentages, except for Italy and Romania, where they are slightly lower, range between 30 and 50 percent of the total students. Fourth, in most schools we focus on, students spend most of their time on practical work, with less time on school-based instruction. During the time spent in school, their education is primarily focused on vocational content, with a smaller portion dedicated to general education subjects, constituting between 25 and 40 percent of the total time. Fifth, vocational education reforms in most countries focus on two changes: a push towards greater employer involvement in shaping vocational curricula, expanding apprenticeship opportunities, modernizing curricula to keep up with technological advancements, and integrating more digital skills into vocational programs.

	Original langue name	Duration (years of schooling)	% of students attending this type of school	The ratio of school to practical learning	The ratio of general to vocational content
Austria	*Berufsschule*	2/3/4 (9.-10./11./12.)	40	40 : 60	30 : 70
Croatia	*Strukovna škola*	3 (9.-11.)	35	45 : 55	30 : 70
England	*Further Education College*	2/3 (11.-12./13.)	35	45 : 55	25 : 75
Germany	*Berufsschule*	2/3 (9.-10./11.)	30	40 : 60	40 : 60
Italy	*Istituto Professionale*	3/5 (9.-11./9.-13.)	20	60 : 40	30 : 70
Norway	*Yrkesfaglig videregående skole*	4 (2+2) (11.-14.)	50	80-20 (1-2) 10-90 (3-4)	40 : 60 (1-2) 0-100 (3-4)
Romania	*Școală Profesională*	3 (9.-11.)	20	30 : 70	40 : 60

Sources: CEDEFOP & ReferNet, 2024; Education Policy Institute, 2023; Danter, 2024; Eurydice, 2024; Janmat, 2024; Machell, 2024; Mampel, 2024; Moorse, 2024; OECD, 2024; Pigozzo, 2024; Schmid, 2024; Tamang, 2024; Tuttolomondo, 2024.

CIVIC EDUCATION IN VOCATIONAL SCHOOLS

The content of the previous chapter demonstrates that implementing civic education in vocational schools is both highly necessary and very challenging. The implementation is essential because, as we have shown, many students attend vocational schools, which marks the end of their formal education. For most students, this is the last opportunity to systematically acquire and develop the knowledge, attitudes, and skills needed for life in a democratic political system. Between the ages of 15 and 17, this period could be considered formative years during which they shape their political identity. Therefore, from the perspective of liberal democracy and democratic political culture, these young people must receive the highest quality civic education possible. At the same time, the implementation in vocational schools is particularly challenging due to the reasons described in the previous chapter. Namely, most of the time in these schools is spent by students on practical work related to their future profession. Additionally, part of their time in classes is dedicated to their vocational subjects, with only a small portion allocated to general education subjects, of which civic education is a part. How can we ensure these students receive quality civic education under such conditions?

In this chapter, we address the current state of civic education in vocational schools in the countries included in the analysis. We will attempt to answer questions about civic education's presence, scope, and positioning in vocational schools. We are interested in civic education's goals and learning outcomes, as well as the models of delivery and implementation. Furthermore, we are interested in the teachers' competencies for delivering civic education.

Before focusing on vocational schools at the ISCED 3 level, we will briefly present the status of civic education in the countries covered by the analysis at the primary and lower secondary education levels. This analysis is important because it shows the models and main civic education topics students were exposed to before attending vocational schools. We present the overview of the status in Table 3.

The data in the table suggest certain similarities among the countries included in the research but also notable differences. In all countries, two models of civic education are present—cross-curricular and a separate subject—but countries combine them in different ways. In Croatia, only the cross-curricular model is present during the first eight years of schooling. At the other end of the continuum is Norway, which combines the cross-curricular model with the presence of a separate civic education subject throughout all years of primary and lower secondary education. Austria also combines the two models with the cross-curricular approach present during all primary and lower secondary education years, while a separate subject begins in the sixth year of schooling. Italy and Romania are countries that apply the cross-curricular model in the lower grades but switch to a separate subject in the higher grades. On the other hand, England has not introduced civic education at the primary level, while a separate subject exists at the lower secondary level. Regarding the topics, there is diversity among the countries, with the most common themes being 'democracy,' 'human rights,' 'the European Union', and 'government.'

Next, we focus on civic education in vocational schools, presenting data for each country individually in this section. In the following chapter, we will highlight their similarities and differences.

Table 3: Civic education at the level of primary and lower secondary education

	Model (grade)	Main topics
Austria	Cross-curricular (1.-4.)	Human rights; Community; Rules
	Cross-curricular (5.-8.) History, social studies, and citizenship education (6.-8.)	Democracy; Austrian political system; Elections and voting; Media and political participation; European Union structures
Croatia	Cross-curricular (1.-4.)	Human rights, Democracy, Community participation
	Cross-curricular (5.-8.)	Human rights, Democracy, Community participation
England	-	-
	Citizenship (7.-9.)	Social and moral responsibility; Community involvement; Political literacy
Germany	Cross-curricular (1.-4.)	Society; Environment; Technology
	Cross-curricular (5.-9.) Social studies (7.-9.)	German political system; Constitution; European Union; International Community
Italy	Cross-curricular (1.-5.)	Italian Constitution; Sustainability; Digital citizenship
	Civic education (6.-8.)	Italian Constitution; Sustainability; Digital citizenship
Norway	Cross-curricular (1.-7.) Social studies (1.-7.)	Democracy; Social interaction; Mutual respect
	Cross-curricular (8.-10.) Social studies (8.-10.)	Norwegian democracy; The workings of government; Active citizenship; Human rights
Romania	Cross-curricular (1.-2.) Civic education (3.-4.)	Community; Democracy; Rules
	Social education (5.-8.)	Romanian political system; European Union; Citizen's rights and responsibilities; Tolerance and diversity

5.1.

Austria

In Austria, we focus on vocational schools (*Berufsschulen*), which students begin attending in their ninth year of schooling. Austria is unique in that it was the first country in the European Union, in 2007, to lower the voting age from 18 to 16 years for all types of elections and referendums. This decision was accompanied by reforms in civic education, strengthening its presence at the lower secondary education level by extending the compulsory subject, *History, Social Studies, and Citizenship Education*, from one to three academic years. Since 2008, civic education in Austria, as shown in Table 3, has been implemented as a combination of a cross-curricular model during the first eight years of schooling and as a separate subject taught from the sixth to the eighth grade.

For this study, it is important to note that the aforementioned subject continues to be taught at the upper secondary education level, where it is mandatory not only in schools focused on general education but also in vocational schools, which are of primary interest here (Danter, 2024; Schmid-Heher, 2024). In these schools, civic education, alongside native and foreign languages and basic economic skills, forms part of what is referred to as general education content. The civic education curriculum is identical for all types of vocational schools. It is delivered over two academic years, with one hour of instruction per week, amounting to 80 hours of civic education during students' schooling. Civic education in Austria's vocational schools has three main areas of focus. The first area is called 'Learning and Working,' which covers the legal basis of apprenticeships, apprentices' rights, duties at work, unions, and other social partners. The second area is titled 'Living in Society,' addressing topics like prejudice and stereotypes, discrimination, and strategies for confronting and reflecting on these societal structures. It also includes discussions on health, the environment, and traffic safety. The third area, 'participating in society and contributing to democracy,' predominantly focuses on the political systems of the European Union and Austria and democracy in general.

The analysis (Danter, 2024; Schmid-Heher, 2024) of civic education implementation in Austrian vocational schools suggests several key challenges. The first challenge stems from the limited time allocated to general education content in vocational schools. Students spend 25% to 30% of their time at school, with the remainder dedicated to practical training. Additionally, of the time allocated to school-based learning, only a third is devoted to general education content; within that, only a small portion is dedicated to civic education. Schmid-Heher (2024) estimates that vocational schools devote three to four times less time to civic education than schools focused on general education. This means that civic education is treated as a secondary priority. The second challenge relates to the content itself. Schmid-Heher (2024) notes that the current program is, in his view, insufficiently political in the sense that it focuses more on providing basic societal orientation rather than developing political competencies. According to him, the current curriculum still contains remnants of the more conservative approach from the 1960's. Despite this, he believes that curriculum content is not the main issue in civic education in vocational schools, as it still offers many ways to foster democratic competencies and support young people's participation in politics. Schmid-Heher (2024), along with other experts (Danter, 2024), identifies the key challenge as the issue of teacher competencies. He argues that competent and motivated teachers are more important for the successful implementation of civic education, especially in vocational schools than the curriculum or the schoolbook. Schmid-Heher (2024) states:

"And so sometimes the lessons in civic education can be very motivating for the students, and it can be like a space open towards discussion…However, it can also be quite boring. It depends on the teacher's qualifications because teachers often teach civic education without proper education. And those teachers, of course, are more likely to stick to the schoolbooks and the curriculum and probably are afraid of an open discussion because they might have to deal with controversial opinions and then probably don't even know how to properly react when they have to deal with, for example, a group focused enemy like sexism, racism, antisemitism. And then they would rather level down civic education to mere instruction and put, for example, laws in the center of attention and then the political system…It's easier to take the school book and explain the rights and duties of an apprentice than to question if this is just as it is or if there are changes necessary, what role unions might play, and what options an apprentice has in order to get his rights actually in a situation at work."

Schmid-Heher (2024), therefore, sees the key to improving civic education in vocational schools in Austria as enhancing the quality of teacher training. According to him, better-trained teachers are essential for advancing civic education and ensuring its effective implementation in vocational schools.

5.2.

Croatia

Civic education in vocational schools in Croatia is formally implemented as a combination of a cross-curricular model and a separate subject. The civic education curriculum as a cross-curricular theme was adopted by the ministry responsible for education in 2019 (Ministarstvo znanosti i obrazovanja RH, 2019). According to this curriculum, civic topics must be integrated into all school subjects. The curriculum is organized around three main domains—democracy, human rights, and active community participation—with students' content and educational expectations varying according to different educational levels. In three-year vocational schools, the topics covered within the domain of democracy include power, authority, elections, characteristics of democratic and non-democratic regimes, the organization of government in Croatia, and European Union institutions. In the domain of human rights, primary topics include national and international human rights protection instruments, the rights of national minorities, and the human rights protection system in Croatia. Under active community participation, students explore local community projects, civil society, non-governmental organizations, volunteering, and more.

The second part of civic education in three-year vocational schools is delivered through a separate subject called *Politics and Economy*, which is taught in the second year of the program for two hours per week, totaling approximately 70 hours per year (Ministarstvo prosvjete i športa RH, 1996). As the name suggests, this subject combines instruction on political and economic phenomena. The primary objectives in the politics segment include gaining knowledge about politics as a phenomenon, political institutions, and political processes, as well as fostering a political culture for active participation in the political system, including exercising and overseeing state power. The subject comprises 17 teaching units related to politics and 16 units focusing on economics. The units on politics predominantly cover the constitutional-political structure of Croatia, with topics such as the state, parliament and parliamentarian, elections, political parties, etc.

The above suggests that civic education in vocational schools in Croatia is not unfavorable. However, numerous experts (Šalaj, 2014; Baketa, 2024) point to significant issues and shortcomings in implementing civic education in schools, generally and specifically in vocational schools. The application of the cross-curricular model faces two significant challenges. First, teachers of individual subjects often lack sufficient time in their schedules to systematically address civic education topics, as they primarily need to fulfill the objectives of their respective subjects. Second, some teachers do not feel adequately competent to teach topics related to human rights, democracy, and active community participation, leading them to avoid these subjects whenever possible.

The situation with the subject *of Politics and Economy* is also highly uncertain. At the time of this study, public and professional debates are ongoing in Croatia regarding new curricula for all vocational schools, including the three-year programs of particular interest here. The national agency responsible for vocational education (Agency for Vocational Education and Adult Education) developed the proposed new curricula and primarily aimed to strengthen the vocational component. These new curricula were initiated by employers and trade associations, who insisted on highlighting specific knowledge and skills needed for individual professions aligned with labor market needs. In practice, this reduces the time allocated for general education content while expanding the time for vocational content and practical training for students. More specifically, there is a proposal to remove *Politics and Economy* from the mandatory general education content in vocational schools, allowing it only as an optional, modular subject that each school's principal could decide to implement. The proposals provide no criteria for principals to follow when selecting optional modules. Such proposals have elicited numerous adverse reactions from experts, teachers, and NGOs, who argue that students in three-year vocational programs require special attention in developing political literacy and democratic political culture. Should these proposed curricula be adopted, it would signify a complete abandonment of the idea of fostering democratic political culture among students in three-year vocational schools in Croatia, leaving workforce preparation as the sole goal of these schools.

5.3.

England

England is a country that is often highlighted in academic literature (for example, Šalaj 2005) as a leading example of strengthening civic education in schools. Specifically, since the 2002/2003 school year, all English schools at the lower secondary level, from grade 7 to grade 9, introduced a new school subject called *Citizenship*. Previously, civic education was addressed as a cross-curricular theme. The new subject, *Citizenship*, became a mandatory part of the national curriculum, encompassing approximately 5% of the total curriculum time. Civic education is conceptualized through three main dimensions: social and moral responsibility, community involvement, and political literacy.

However, the aforementioned description applies only to the lower secondary education level, while the situation is entirely different at the upper secondary level. At this level, civic education is not a mandatory part of the curriculum in vocational schools or academic schools, which are our focus here. In other words, English students at the upper secondary level, including students in vocational schools, do not have the opportunity to engage with civic education systematically.

Such a situation, the complete absence of civic education, is seen by experts (Janmaat, 2018; 2024; Moorse, 2024) as highly problematic and concerning. Janmaat highlights that this state is primarily due to educational authorities' prevailing attitude that vocational education needs to focus on the skills necessary to perform a particular job very well, with little regard for other components that could promote a more active, well-rounded citizen. This fits within the broader context of the highly specialized nature of education in England. Criticizing this situation, experts advocate for the introduction of civic education in vocational schools, with Janmaat (2024) noting:

"I think civic education needs to be introduced in vocational education. It should be the same as that provided in the academic track. Now, interestingly, neither happens in England. You will not find civic education in vocational education or the academic track; even those who do levels in the academic track may not take any subjects that are remotely related to civic education. So I recommend having a compulsory civic education course in both tracks. And also what is interesting here is that I think it's also specifically necessary for the vocational tracks because they tend to recruit young people from more disadvantaged backgrounds."

Moorse (2024) also points out that the absence of civic education in upper secondary education is a significant issue for developing a democratic political culture in England. She believes that civic education at this level should be delivered as a separate subject. Furthermore, she emphasizes the importance of teacher training, stressing that civic education in schools must be taught by teachers who have undergone specialized training in civic education.

5.4.

Germany

Germany is a country that, due to its political history and experiences under the National Socialist totalitarian regime, places particular emphasis on educational processes aimed at fostering a democratic political culture. The German term for civic education is 'politische Bildung,' which literally means 'political education' but is also understood to encompass civic education. The importance Germany attaches to this field is evidenced by public agencies dedicated solely to citizens' political or civic education. At the federal level, there is the Federal Agency for Civic Education (*Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung*). In contrast, there is the State Agency for Civic Education (*Landeszentrale für politische Bildung*) at the level of individual states.

Civic education is present at all levels of the educational system in Germany. It is based on the 'Beutelsbach Consensus' from 1976 (Wieland, 2019), which continues to shape the understanding of civic education in Germany. The three fundamental principles of this consensus are as follows: 1) the prohibition of overpowering and indoctrination, where teachers should not impose their opinions on students but instead enable them to form their own; 2) the requirement for controversy, ensuring that controversial topics in science and politics are presented as such in education; and 3) the principle of empowerment in judgment, which encourages students to represent their interests throughout the learning process independently.

Civic education is incorporated as a cross-curricular theme in vocational schools, our primary focus here, though it is primarily delivered as a separate, mandatory subject called *Social Studies*. This subject is part of the general curriculum for all vocational specializations and is taught for 40 hours per year, approximately one hour per week, over three years of training (Besand, 2014; Machell, 2024). The curriculum covers six main topics across the three school years. The first topic is democracy, which includes discussions on democracy, the historical processes of the 20th century, the foundations of the democratic state, and human rights. The second topic is globalization, the third is international relations and the European Union, the fourth is peace, and the fifth addresses new technologies. The sixth topic, 'I-You-We Relations', explores various forms of social interactions and coexistence.

Even though Germany places significant emphasis on civic education for young people, experts generally agree that civic education in vocational schools faces several serious challenges, two of which are highlighted here. Besand (2014) identifies marginalization as a key issue in implementing civic education in vocational schools. Civic education is often viewed as less important than other subjects and is scheduled at marginal hours. Most teachers and students in vocational schools focus on meeting the central exam requirements of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry. Preparation for these exams frequently takes precedence, emphasizing economic and legal knowledge more than civic education. Consequently, teachers tend to concentrate more on exam requirements than state curricula. As a result, final exams, which prioritize economic and legal topics over social issues, become the unofficial curriculum, reducing the focus on civic education and participatory approaches (Besand, 2014). In this context, students may not perceive civic education as relevant to their professional future. In some vocational programs, *Social Studies* does not even impact final grades, leading to the subject's further marginalization, as hours may be redirected if teachers or students choose.

Another challenge lies in the insufficiently developed competencies of teachers delivering civic education in vocational schools. Ideally, *Social Studies* teachers at vocational schools would complete a specialized study program designed to prepare them for civic education instruction. However, due to a shortage of teachers, particularly in vocational schools, civic education classes are often taught by teachers who have never studied this subject or who prepared for teaching in a different school type, leading to inadequate preparation (Besand, 2014). Due to the lack of specialized professionals, non-formal education becomes essential. External experts trained in their field may deliver project-based lessons alongside the core curriculum but typically only participate in classes for a short duration.

External civil rights organizations or other civic education players are invited less frequently to vocational schools than to general secondary schools (Machell, 2024). Experts highlight the importance of continuous improvement in teacher education and training as a primary need. Teachers must be equipped to address recent social and political processes, especially given the increasing influence of extremist political factions aiming to minimize civic education in schools. While respecting constitutional provisions on free speech, teachers must also be trained to address anti-democratic statements effectively.

5.5.

Italy

The civic education reform was initiated in Italy in 2019 and encompassed the entire educational system, from primary to upper secondary education. In this section, we focus on the status of civic education in vocational schools (*Istituto Professionale*). However, it should be noted that the models of implementation and the content of civic education are identical across all types of schools at the upper-secondary education level (Pigozzo, 2024; Tuttolomondo, 2024).

The mentioned reform began to be implemented in the 2020/2021 school year when civic education started to be applied in all schools as a compulsory cross-curricular subject. The guidelines for civic education provide topics that should be treated or discussed with students, but it's up to the schools and teachers to decide how to do it. The contents of civic education refer to three main areas: the Italian Constitution (national

and international law, the organization of the State and regional and local authorities, etc.), sustainable development (protection of the environment and heritage, health education, respect for animals, etc.), and digital citizenship (responsible use of technologies, awareness of risks, approaches to the use of technologies). Civic education has a timetable of at least 33 hours per year, and its teaching must involve other curricular subjects without increasing the overall weekly or annual timetable. The students take exams at the end of each school year to show how well they understand civic principles. This ensures they understand concepts like citizenship, local development, and digital skills and can apply them in real-life situations.

Most experts in Italy consider this new civic education curriculum a positive step forward compared to the previous period, though they still point out particular challenges. For instance, Pigozzo (2024) argues that a juridical approach to citizenship still largely permeates the new civic education curriculum. Such a juridical approach to civic education is considered conservative because Pigozzo views the political dimension, which includes understanding political power struggles, political power, and power dynamics, as a crucial aspect of citizenship. However, according to the author, this part is missing from the new civic education curriculum. The same author points out another, more general issue related to civic education in Italy, which we could also say applies to other countries. Namely, Pigozzo (2024) believes that improving civic education requires a more methodological awareness of what civic education means, what the civic learning objectives are in terms of abilities and competencies, what the best didactic approaches are, etc. It also requires thinking about the structure and functioning of the school system itself because certain key aspects of how the school system operates create the hidden curriculum of civic education. Since civic education is a general objective of the entire curriculum, it is not just about having a subject within it. To make changes, you must also consider structural changes to the system. This includes making structural changes in how you train and hire teachers, the social status of this profession, their salaries, and so on.

Tuttolomondo (2024) emphasizes the issue of teacher education, pointing out that many teachers are not qualified to deliver civic education. Currently, no specific training is available to provide teachers with valuable guidelines. As a result, it is somewhat difficult for teachers to grasp the importance or value of teaching civic education within vocational education. Additionally, given that school curricula are usually packed, it is already challenging to cover subjects directly related to teaching. This situation can overwhelm teachers as they attempt to develop a practical agenda for teaching civic education.

Experts also welcome the fact that civic education is present in the same form across all types of schools at the upper secondary level. However, they caution about the differences between vocational schools and schools focusing on general education. These differences concern the other subjects that make up the curriculum and through which civic education is also implemented, such as history, Italian language, foreign language, etc. These subjects are more limited in vocational schools, not only in terms of the time allocated to them but also in terms of their perceived importance by the students.

Finally, it should be noted that when this study was conducted, Italy was undergoing processes of vocational education reform, partly driven by the challenges posed by the pandemic crisis (Pigozzo, 2024). This reform, driven by European funding to overcome the crisis, is part of a broader restructuring of the state's bureaucratic systems. As the primary recipient of European financial support, Italy was required to reform several areas, including vocational education. The reform focuses on three main objectives. Firstly, the number of students choosing vocational pathways should be increased. Secondly, to strengthen the connection between secondary education and the labor market. Lastly, the reform aims to integrate technological advancements, such as artificial intelligence and digitalization, into the vocational education system, ensuring it stays relevant to modern developments. The question arises whether these reforms will further weaken the already fragile position of civic education within the vocational education framework.

5.6.

Norway

Upper secondary education in Norway distinguishes between two fundamental types of programs: general education programs, which last for three years, and vocational programs, which typically last for four years. We are particularly interested in vocational schools (*Yrkesfaglig videregående skole*), that is, vocational programs, as it is important to note that most schools at the upper secondary education level in Norway are combined schools, meaning they simultaneously offer both general education and vocational programs. There is a standard national curriculum at the upper secondary education level, but within this established framework, schools and teachers could influence the program's implementation (Eriksen Grevle, 2022; Mempel, 2024; Tamang, 2024).

Most vocational programs last four years and follow the so-called 'two plus two' model, where students spend the first two years predominantly in school and the following two years primarily engaged in practical work in the form of apprenticeships and work placements in companies. The national curriculum determines the teaching content, with all programs consisting of two parts: the first is common to all schools (*Common core subjects*), and the second depends on the program type (*Core curriculum options*). One of the mandatory subjects in all schools at the upper secondary education level is *Social Studies*, through which civic education is delivered to students. The content and scope of the subject are the same in both general and vocational schools, and the subject is taught over two school years with a total of 84 teaching hours.

In terms of content, the subject focuses on understanding democracy by addressing the relationship between the individual and society. Its main goal is the development of students' critical thinking. Students should understand why a democratic system is better than autocratic alternatives and analyze power relations in Norwegian society. Students should also become aware of the importance of their active participation in political processes.

Experts highlight several key challenges related to the implementation of civic education at the upper secondary education level in Norway. Mempel (2024) identifies the lack of quality scientific and professional research on the implementation of civic education in vocational schools as the main issue, which results in the absence of a solid foundation for discussion. This refers to the lack of analyses addressing the problems and challenges in implementation and the limited number of studies on the political literacy of vocational school students. The same author also believes vocational school students lack opportunities and time to directly apply the knowledge and skills acquired during civic education, especially in schools and local communities where student participation is not high on the list of priorities.

5.7.

Romania

Civic education is present in Romania at the primary and lower secondary education levels through a combination of a cross-curricular model and separate subjects. However, the situation is significantly different at the upper secondary education level, including vocational schools, which are of primary interest here. In this type of school, civic education is not a mandatory part of the general education content that all students must attend (Vasile, 2024). Civic education in vocational schools can be chosen by students only if the school decides to include it in its educational offer. If included, the subject is most commonly taught under the name *Man and Society* for one hour per school week. When available, civic education in vocational schools, according to the curriculum, aims to develop students' understanding of democracy, politics, civil society, and its role in a democracy. Learning activities in civic education at the upper secondary level include content analysis, simulations, role-playing, case studies, portfolio work, social learning, cooperative learning, and community-based activities.

The aforementioned information is purely theoretical, and in practice, the educational offer is often tied to the specific needs of the teaching staff in a particular school. A teacher must meet several weekly teaching hours to fulfill their teaching norm. In some cases, this may involve teaching at more than one school, and it is not uncommon for one teacher to cover multiple subjects. As a result, a teacher who needs additional teaching hours may advocate for civic education to be included in the school's educational offer to meet their required weekly hours. This situation leads to statistical variations and inconsistent data for researchers, but most importantly, it results in a fluctuating and uncertain educational offer for students.

This suggests that Romania has focused its efforts on civic education almost entirely on the lower levels of schooling—primary and lower secondary education. At the upper secondary level, civic education appears as an elective or optional part of the curriculum, indicating that educational authorities do not view developing students' democratic political culture as a primary task of vocational schools.

DISCUSSION

The picture we can form based on the analysis conducted in the previous chapter is neither simple nor straightforward. However, in general, we cannot be satisfied with the status of civic education in vocational schools in the countries included in our study.

The most concerning situation was identified in England, where civic education is entirely neglected in vocational schools at the upper secondary education level. A similar situation is found in Romania, where civic education is only available in some schools as an elective or optional subject. In all other countries, civic education is present in vocational schools as a cross-curricular topic, a standalone subject, or a combination of both models. In Italy, civic education is integrated exclusively as a cross-curricular topic. At the same time, the standalone subject model is used in Austria and Norway, and it is called *History, Social Studies, and Citizenship Education* in Austria and *Social Studies* in Norway. Germany and Croatia implement civic education in vocational schools through a combination of the cross-curricular approach and a standalone subject named *Social Studies* in Germany and *Politics and Economy* in Croatia.

There are specific differences among the countries included in the analysis. However, this section will focus on the problems and challenges common to most or all countries. First and foremost, it should be noted that in the cases of England and Romania, political and educational authorities have abandoned the idea of offering civic education programs to students in vocational schools, who are at a formative stage of their development during this schooling period. Thus, it can be concluded that the prevailing view in these two countries is that vocational schools at the upper secondary level should function solely to prepare young people for the labor market. However, even in countries where civic education is part of the curriculum, there are inevitable structural tensions due to the very nature of vocational education. This was discussed by Schmid-Heher (2024) in the context of Austria, and we believe this applies to all the other countries as well. Specifically, the vocational part of a student's education, especially the practical component, is organized around training-specific skills. In such conditions, "there is limited space for discussion because you must first deliver what you are supposed to and then not question everything. I don't doubt that many educators provide good explanations and foster critical thinking, but it cannot be in the center of attention" (Schmid-Heher, 2024). Additionally, most practical training occurs in private companies where a democratic organization is unlikely. This structural tension differentiates the implementation of civic education in vocational schools from that in general education schools in all the countries analyzed.

For now, this structural tension is being resolved by the dominance of the socio-economic function over the socio-cultural one. This holds true for all the countries included in the analysis, even Germany, where the situation regarding civic education is arguably the best. The analysis has shown that in German vocational schools, the focus is also on achieving vocational objectives. It appears that this trend of prioritizing vocational goals at the expense of general educational goals will continue, as evidenced by recent reforms in vocational education in certain countries. A paradigmatic example is Croatia, where plans to remove the standalone civic education subject from the three-year vocational schools' curriculum to create more room for vocational content and practical training.

A challenge identified in all the countries included in the analysis pertains to teacher training and their competencies for teaching civic education. The analysis revealed that many teachers expected to deliver civic education in vocational schools do not feel adequately competent for this role. This situation arises from higher education institutions, and programs where teachers could specifically specialize in delivering civic education are scarce. Additionally, continuous professional development for vocational schoolteachers in the field of civic education is more of an exception than a rule. The lack of teacher training is evident in content-related aspects, such as preparation for specific controversial social and political issues. In the didactic dimension, that is, preparing to teach civic education in the specific context of vocational schools.

In terms of content, the analysis shows a variety of topics, but experts caution that there are specific challenges in this area as well. A common issue that emerges is a form of depoliticization of civic education, where discussions on controversial social topics are often avoided, and the focus shifts to the legal dimensions of the constitutional and political system. Political institutions are studied, while less emphasis is placed on the role of informed and responsible citizens who actively participate in the political processes of their communities. This situation is partly due to the civic education curriculum itself, but more so, according to experts, because many teachers do not feel sufficiently competent to address controversial political topics in the classroom.

An additional insight that should be highlighted, which is common to almost all the countries included in the analysis, is the lack of systematic monitoring and evaluation of the implementation of civic education in vocational schools.

CONCLUSION

Contemporary democratic societies are facing numerous social, economic, and political challenges, of which two are particularly relevant for the study of civic education in vocational schools. On one hand, contemporary societies are experiencing rapid demographic changes, most notably an aging population and a declining number of young people. Such demographic trends lead to a shortage of qualified labor, especially in specific trades and professions. As a potential response to this challenge, contemporary societies aim to prepare young people in vocational schools to enter the labor market as quickly as possible, often encouraging them to spend part of their school time in the workplace. However, with this approach, general educational content, including civic education, is increasingly marginalized in vocational schools. This marginalization is often evident in the limited time allocated to civic education, which is very modest. Moreover, it is almost always reflected in the perception of civic education by educational authorities, employers' associations, and even some teachers and students as a subject of marginal importance.

The marginalization of civic education in vocational schools occurs precisely when contemporary societies face another major challenge: the rise of extreme political options, particularly right-wing populist movements, which question some of the core values of liberal democracy. There is a concern that young people with lower levels of education are more likely to vote for such political options, and even more worryingly, they may adopt views that reject liberal democracy as a political system (Werfhorst, 2016). It would be logical to expect that contemporary societies, in response to these threats, would intensify efforts to promote the development of a democratic political culture through their education systems. This is especially true for vocational schools, attended by students for whom this level of education is often the last point of contact with the formal education system.

It is evident that contemporary social and political processes present contradictory challenges for vocational education. Our overview suggests that countries focus their efforts primarily on the socio-economic function, i.e., preparing young people for the labor market. Thus, **the first and most general, yet also the most important recommendation, is to restore balance, ensuring that the preparation of young people for the role of active citizens—civic education—becomes a substantial part of vocational education, not just formally but in practice as well.[6]** Advocating for strengthening civic education in vocational schools assumes the creation of coalitions involving actors from academia, teachers' associations, civil society organizations, and especially youth associations. These coalitions could build social power (Wright, 2010) to be leveraged in advocacy efforts. A good example of this process is the strengthening of civic education in Austria in 2008 when educational authorities decided to enhance the civic education program in Austrian schools only after significant pressure from broader societal forces, particularly youth associations.

The second important recommendation relates to a challenge identified in all countries: the urgent need to improve the education and training of teachers who deliver civic education in vocational schools. This improvement is necessary both at the stage of initial teacher education and during ongoing professional development. The need for better teacher education is likely one of the issues on which there is the most significant consensus among the countries included in the analysis. In the next phase of our project, we will aim

to identify the key aspects that future teacher training and professional development programs should address through interviews with teachers who conduct civic education in vocational schools.

Our third recommendation also assumes the presence of competent teachers. It addresses the need for civic education in vocational schools to consider the specific characteristics of different trades and professions. This need has been mentioned by several experts, particularly Moorse (2024), who states: "But when we think about vocational education and civics, I think we've got to think a bit differently about it. We've got to find the touch points within the subject areas and the qualifications students have chosen and teach civics modules related to those subjects. So, whether they're training to be an engineer, a hairdresser, or a nurse, I think there is some basic fundamental citizenship and civics knowledge that relate to those vocations and professions."

The fourth recommendation focuses on strengthening the connection between vocational schools and non-governmental organizations by creating service-learning programs that link classroom teaching with students' direct engagement in the community. This would allow vocational school students to gain practical experience in their field of study and the dimension of active citizenship. Establishing more durable and robust connections between schools and organizations is particularly important in rapid social and political changes, where new and controversial topics emerge in the public sphere. In such situations, the formal school system often lacks the flexibility to quickly prepare teaching on these topics. Organizations specialized in these areas could be involved, ensuring that students receive relevant information. This model has been suggested by several experts, including Danter (2024), who states: "I think this is also our duty, more to say, to include recent topics… But you cannot prepare yourself when you're a regular teacher; you have your courses and your curriculum, then something like October 7 happens, and then you need to know everything about this kind of conflict and the historical background and focus on antisemitism and so on… So, I think my opinion on how

to include this kind of recent topic in school is that the school system needs to be more open to other organizations that handle it at a professional level."

Integrating civic education into vocational schools presents challenges, as the primary emphasis is often on job-specific skills rather than broader societal issues. Addressing these challenges necessitates a concerted effort to embed civic education within the vocational curriculum, offer professional development opportunities for educators, and create avenues for student engagement in civic activities within the school environment and local community.

The final recommendation concerns the need for future systematic empirical research on various aspects of the implementation of civic education in vocational schools, as the analysis in this study has shown that such research is essential if we are to effectively work towards improving the ideals of democratic political culture among students. This kind of research is still lacking; therefore, in the next phase of our project, we will focus precisely on this topic.

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6   In this study, we have primarily focused on civic education within the curriculum, paying less attention to other dimensions such as school culture, teacher relationships, the role of principals, and the connection between schools and the local community. These can significantly influence students' socialization into a democratic political culture. Even a cursory examination of these aspects suggests they may be significant for vocational schools. Therefore, we plan to incorporate these considerations into our future research.

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